

## **SERMON FOR MOTHERING SUNDAY | 26.03.17**

**Coming back from Vietnam on Tuesday, my head is still spinning with the sounds and images that we experienced there. Of course, after all these years there is a bit of me that looks – and then wonders, ‘*isn’t there a sermon in there somewhere?!*’ I hope, though that I am not as bad as the figure in an American book of cartoons which shows a man in swimming trunks on a beach building - a pulpit – with his wife dryly calling out ‘Hey, Wilbur, no one would guess that you are a pastor...!’**

**But back to Vietnam: I had read in a book that 80% of the population there have no faith. The government is communist and religion is frowned on. So why was it in that every single taxi – bar one – there was a figure of the Buddha stuck to the dashboard? Of course it may be because their driving is insane and that not one of the 7million moped riders had ever read the Highway Code. Or it may be that – in a highly materialistic society where someone is always trying to sell you something – there remains a quiet acceptance of a caring God that you would call in on occasionally at some local Temple, joss stick in hand, but who didn’t disturb you for the rest of the time.**

**Funnily enough, the most religious experience was in Hanoi – at the tomb of Ho Chi Minh, “the great Father”, who did so much to end the colonial regimes of first the French and then the Americans. The embalmed body of Ho Chi Minh, whose face is everywhere in Vietnam including on all the bank-notes, lies in a vast Mausoleum and we decided to go and pay a visit; alongside twenty thousand others – the queue was huge. To begin with it was all great fun with people, wanting to take selfies with me because I was (to them) so tall! Then as we got closer, our bags were taken from us, our camera was efficiently stowed away, and we were regimented into two single file columns. Finally, as we got into the Mausoleum itself, we were told to keep total silence. Maria was even told off for having her hands in her pockets!**

**And there, in the semi darkness, was the tiny figure of the Great leader himself, protected by scores of guards in immaculate white uniforms, shimmering slightly in the slightly violet artificial lighting. It was certainly a religious experience and more controlled than any shrine you have ever been to.**

**Yet Ho Chi Minh has been dead for thirty years!**

**Today - Mothering Sunday, Refreshment Sunday, call it what you like – we are making a pitch for an utterly different kind of religious experience. Instead of looking to a talisman on the dashboard to keep us from having a road accident; or instead of paying respects to a formidable but very dead political leader, we draw on the imagery of Motherhood to describe the relationship we have with God.**

**We don't need to spend long reflecting on the crucial role Mothers have in every single one of our lives. Not only did they bring us into this world, they have a lifelong bond with us that is always life-changing. At its best and, sadly, at its worst, it is the relationship that most informs the way we feel about ourselves and the way we look at the world. Mother-child relationships are about more than empathy or friendship; they are key to our confidence, crucial in making us who we are.**

**So isn't it strange that the two stories we get from today's Readings are somewhat dysfunctional? In the first we are taken to Egypt where an enslaved Israelite mother is terrified because she is forbidden to keep her baby boy. What is she to do? The answer is to make up a reed basket, waterproof it and place it, famously, among the bulrushes. That is to say, she has to let go of her son and place his future into the hands of – who knows? Perhaps he will be discovered and killed; perhaps he will be discovered and saved. There is nothing more that she can do – except pray like mad of course.**

**And in the Gospel Jesus, having celebrated the Passover with Mary and Joseph, gets separated from them – or, in reality, he separates himself from them - and goes off in search of the professors at the Temple University while his parents are making their way home. It takes them three days to find him before he comes up with the statement that *'they shouldn't be surprised to find him there as he was bound to be about his father God's business.'***

**If the relationship of a mother and child is so close: if we see this as the model of our closeness to God and use the words of St Anselm: *Like a mother you gather your people to you: you are gentle with us as a mother with her children, why are we given these two stories to work with?***

**Today (at 10am) we are celebrating two new beginnings. In baptism we are welcoming Saffron Bentley into membership of the Church; and at the same time we are saying goodbye to Jill Hetherington who, after over 30 years in Islington, is moving to a Nursing Home in Chiswick. In each case a new beginning: a birth into a new and largely unknown world.**

**And the key to the success of this new adventure is the very opposite of what we found in Vietnam. God is not some kind of talisman, the beaming if somewhat static protector of people who drive like lunatics. Nor is he the one who waits for the odd quick conversation when we happen to be passing a convenient Temple. Nor, of course, is he just some old dry figure in a glass case – however valiant his history.**

**Christianity is about flesh and blood, life and death, love and hate – and a never-ending relationship with the one who first gave us life, the one who never ceases to be our friend, come what may. Just as there are times when we find ourselves shouting and screaming at our mothers (metaphorically or otherwise!), so we find ourselves angry with God; just as we fall into our mother's arms in pain or joy or sheer exhaustion, so we are invited to fall into the arms of God.**

**Sometimes it will go right: sometimes it will be much more of a struggle. Sometimes (like our mothers) he appears to be incredibly deaf to our wants and needs; at other times we simply know how much we have to thank him for. It will change, ebb and flow, tease us, frustrate us. But it is real and depends much less for its success on us than it does on him. We may be fickle but he will stick with us – like the best of mothers; that is why the mother image is so strong and the reason why the Church is also like a mother to us: for one another we remain loving friends even though, at times, we find ourselves falling out.**

**Naturally the mothering image gets a bit stretched today because all of us, male and female, are called to 'mother' one another in the journey of faith. The hymn-writer Fred Kaan gets it right when he says: *Thank you for belonging, shelter, bonds of friendship, ties of blood, and for those who have no children, yet are parents under God.***

**But the Moses and Jesus in the Temple stories stop us getting too sentimental about all this. There are times when mothers – and indeed all of us – have to, in the words of the cliché - *let go and let God*. There will be times when we can't help and protect one another (as with Moses); times when life become incredibly complex and unpredictable and we have to allow people their freedom (as with Jesus in the Temple).**

**This isn't, though, just a kind of Oriental fatalism. It is the kind of trust in God that keeps us realistic. He will allow us to do whatever we want because, as a parent, that is his role. But it is his calling – and ours – to support all those making new starts, big and small, in the knowledge that they will be loved and understood, come what may and however many mistakes they make.**

**That is what the Church must be about. That is what families and friendships should be about too. And of course it is how God has always been.**

**As another hymn writer, Michael Forster has put it so well:**

***Let love be real, in giving and receiving,  
without the need to manage and to own;  
a haven free from posing and pretending,  
where ev'ry weakness may be safely known.  
Give me your hand, along the desert pathway,  
give me your love, wherever we may go.  
As God loves us, so let us love each other:  
with no demands just open hands and space to grow.***