Mothering Sunday St James Prebend St 10th March 2024

*May the words that I speak and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you O God, now and always. Amen*

You’re probably well aware of the fact that at church we call today Mothering Sunday although nearly everyone else calls it Mothers’ Day.

‘Mothers’ Day’ is certainly not traditional, but that’s not the reason the church hasn’t changed over. Mother’s Day is about our own mothers. Nothing wrong with that of course as far as it goes but the church calls it ‘Mothering Sunday’ because it’s about so much more than our mothers - Allowing for the possibility that mothering may be – and frequently is - more than simply a biological relationship. And it’s not so often heard these days, but traditionally Mother Church, who nurtures us and brings us up in the faith of Christ, is also celebrated on Mothering Sunday.

*Mothering* is an important part of our faith; we learn from God in Scripture and from Jesus’s actions and teaching that loving and caring for others, unconditionally, is what we are called to do as disciples of Christ. Loving and caring for their children unconditionally is what mothers are celebrated for… but mothers are not the only ones who care for others and love them unconditionally.

The reading from the Book of Hosea which was read to us just now is part of a longer passage that describes God breaking his heart over the rebellious behaviour of the Israelites. They just don’t get what’s good for them, they don’t understand that what God asks them to do is for their own good.

Like many a frustrated parent trying to argue with a bolshie teenager, God recalls how much time and effort he has already spent on them.

*When Israel was a child I loved him…. The more I called to them the more they went from me,*

*Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I carried him in my arms, I picked him up and held him close to me. I led him with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.*

Ephraim was one of the sons of Joseph, a grandson of Jacob, and his tribe became the most important of the tribes of Israel. Here his name is used symbolically to mean all the people of Israel, and it allows Hosea to talk about them as if they were one person.

It depends a bit which translation you read, but in many of the more recent translations it’s clear to see that Hosea was using the image of a parent to describe God’s love – the patient, enduring love that encourages the baby to stand and find his feet, that goes slowly and waits for the toddler to catch up, that is ready with open arms to catch her when she trips up. That’s the kind of care Ephraim has been given, but it’s rejected and now “my people are bent on turning away from me”.

Does God give up on Ephraim, on the children of Israel? No – he knows what they deserve, but his love is so great that he cannot let their enemies destroy them;

*How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? …. My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender….. I will not come in wrath.*

That’s the kind of love Jesus wanted people to know about, that’s the kind of love he told stories about. Remember the story of the prodigal son, who slunk home ashamed and desperate, expecting to be kicked. His father ran to meet him with outstretched arms.

Remember the story of the Samaritan who took trouble to make sure a foreigner who’d been mugged and left for dead was kept safe and cared for.

It’s the kind of love Jesus demonstrated in little ways – welcoming children, reminding the parents of the little girl restored to life not to forget in their excitement that she would need something to eat, weeping at the death of his friend Lazarus, accepting the lepers, the mad, the prostitutes, the tax collectors as human beings and minding about them.

And of course in the greatest way possible – by refusing to compromise and limit God’s love according to the prejudices and standards of the time, and so being condemned and put to death.

And as we heard in the Gospel reading, in that moment of that intense pain and suffering, by creating a new relationship of loving care for his mother Mary, and for his friend John

As Mary stands at the foot of the cross with John, we are reminded not only of mothering love, but also of the pain and suffering that may come through loving, and the vulnerability of those who let themselves mother and love others deeply and generously. And the new relationship is born in that appalling place of suffering, where a mother watches the brutal destruction of her child.

Do you remember the images we saw, and sadly continue to see, of mothers and children fleeing from Ukraine….and of the welcoming, mothering, hugs given to complete strangers as they cross the border to safety? The mothering that is offered in such circumstances is surely something that can speak to us of God.

So, similarly, when we see a mother or father or grandparent looking into the face of the baby they love with absolute delight and wonder, we may get just an inkling of the way God looks at us.

Perhaps unexpectedly, a thirteenth century mystic, Mechtild of Magdeburg put it like this,

*God is not only fatherly, God is also mother who lifts her loved child from the ground to her knee. The Trinity is like a mother’s cloak wherein the child finds a home and lays her head on the maternal breast. Seeing Christ in others p 161*

And so what do we do about that? How are we to live out that vision, that belief, that hope of a motherly God who gazes on us with love? Churches, we hope and pray, are places where people are welcomed as they are; a place of family for those who come *as family*. And very importantly it’s also for those who are without family, temporarily because they are far away, or because there is no one left to count as family. How are we to be family for them, and mother them in the love of God?

So, yes, let’s celebrate and pray for all who love and care for others; of course, biological mothers, but not just them, everyone who mothers others!

Why? Because at its deepest level our caring, mothering loving is of God, and it is one way that God’s love becomes present to us on a daily basis. If we as Christians can do anything on a daily basis to spread the gospel it’s in being loving and generous in our relationships, and in opening our hearts and minds to see where love and care is needed.

Yes, it would be lovely if we all had happy families to belong to, but we don’t.

It would be lovely if we were all perfect parents, but we aren’t

It would be lovely if we all stuck to the rules, but we don’t.

And yet we believe that God loves us despite the mess, the mistakes; we need to make sure that we tell others that too.

And we learn about the love of God from the love we have received and shared with those who are most dear to us, who love us despite the times we have hurt or neglected them.

We may not all be mothers, but we are all sons and daughters – and, as Christians, sons and daughters of God, called to live, as people of faithfulness and hope who show and share love with others.

Let’s keep questions to reflect on for a moment now, and to take with us into this coming week.

How do we experience the love of God within our closest relationships? What does this tell us about the nature of God’s love?

Who will you try to love and care for more tenderly this week, with the mothering love of God?

*Silence*

*Loving Christ, living Lord, you pour out your life and love for us*

*You pour out your life and love in us, you pour out your life and love through us*

*Help us to pour out your life and love for others. Amen*

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