

Sermon for 30th March 2025 – Year C – Mothering Sunday

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Exodus 2:1-10; Colossians 3:12-17; John 19:25b-27

Mothering Sunday, or Mother's Day as it's known outwith the Church, seems to be becoming more difficult for many to cope with every passing year. The day that once seemed, when we were children, to be a simple day of gratitude for the woman who gave birth to us and/or raised us, has, as we've grown older, become full of mixed, complicated and often painful feelings. For some of us, our mothers are no longer with us, and they may have died quite recently. For others, our relationship with our mothers is fraught and tricky. And those of us who are mothers may not have the relationship with our children that we long for. Some may have been rejected by a child, or even lost a child. Others will be feeling a sense of desperate powerlessness to help their children – of whatever age – to navigate the many struggles that modern life throws at them. And some of us will feel the pain of never having had the family that we desired and longed for.

Five years ago, one of my very first sermons for Mothering Sunday was completely overtaken by the beginning of the first Covid lockdown. In March 2020, although public church services had stopped, clergy were still permitted in England to go their churches and hold services privately. I went to a church named for St Mawgan in Cornwall and the rector and I livestreamed a service of Holy Communion together, and I did my best to preach out of my pain, that on that day of all days, families had been told to stay apart and the church's message of social inclusion had been remoulded overnight into social distancing. It felt like the antithesis of the Christian faith. We perhaps didn't realise how much we

needed the simple reassurance of giving or receiving a human touch until we were no longer allowed to come closer than two metres to one other.

My own brother, who both then and now runs a company that builds and manages care homes in the north of England had to stay away from his wife and children because he had the heavy responsibility of making sure there were always enough healthy staff in his care homes to keep them open.

A question we pondered then, as we do today, was “Where is God in such a time as this?” Since the time of Covid, the world has seemed to become ever more traumatic. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia was followed by a cost of living crisis that still continues. The actions of Hamas triggered the almost total destruction of Gaza by Israel. And the government of Donald Trump in the United States has unleashed a complete unravelling of the international order that had grown out of the wisdom learned from the Second World War.

We might reasonably ask, ‘why does God allow evil to persist and even flourish in the world?’ God is loving and all-powerful. So why are there earthquakes and hurricanes and wildfires and floods and droughts and famine? The evil dictators are perhaps easier to understand; selfish people seek power so they can continue to be selfish without opposition. They always try to remould their society to call evil good and good evil so that they have a justification for eliminating their opponents.

Whatever the causes of these things, God seems to allow them, for a time. We don’t know why. Free will allows for humans to choose to do terrible things.

But the Christian faith was also born during a terrible oppression, when Roman dictators remoulded Jewish leaders into collaborators or rebels. The Christian faith emerged, erupted even, during times of cruelty and despair. The more suffering the early Christians endured, the more they became known for loving one another. For three hundred years they were persecuted, put in prison,

tortured, executed through various means too horrific to mention, and yet the love they had for each other persisted and grew in the face of all of it.

This week I noticed through our kitchen window in Lochgoilhead that our tulips are beginning to flower, and despite the continuous rain, the daffodils are in full bloom. Even if the human world seems to be full of cruelty and trauma, for the flowers this is a perfectly normal spring: the sun is returning, the warmth is coming back into the soil, the birds are singing, and leaves and flowers are beginning to unfurl. The tulips know nothing of oppression and hatred. It is a simple consolation perhaps, but when your head is full of anxiety and fear, there is something profoundly reassuring in being reminded that even in the midst of horror, moments of happiness and delight can still be found.

But consolations are not limited to gardens and flowerpots. Today we celebrate Mothering Sunday, on which day the Church reminds us that we have not one mother but many mothers.

As we heard in our gospel reading, when Jesus was dying on the cross, he took time to invite his friend John to take responsibility for looking after his mother Mary. “Here is your mother”, he says to John, two thousand years ago, and he continues to say it to us today. Here is your mother, your father, your brothers and your sisters. In Christ, sharing in God’s love, we have all been joined into one family. And this family is God’s response to all the suffering of the world.

In a world so full of cruelty, selfishness, hostility and division, God calls us, through the words of the epistle to the Colossians, to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. God encourages us to bear with one another, and forgive each other, clothing ourselves with love which, the letter says, binds everything together in perfect harmony. As trauma and high anxiety dominate society, our attention is directed to the peace of Christ, which we may find already present in our hearts when we notice the tulips and trees coming into flower around us.

Be thankful, the letter invites us, which is even more extraordinary if the letter is indeed written by St Paul, as he would have been imprisoned in Rome at the time. Be thankful, let Christ dwell in you richly, teach with wisdom, and sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God.

The more horrendous the world becomes, the closer cruelty encroaches upon our doors, the more that evil tries to make us into its own image, the more visibly beautiful the family of God becomes, because it has all these shining characteristics that the world of power and status and selfishness hates. The worse the world becomes, the more passionately we sing.

But this transformation of our hearts, and the growth of the bond of love between us does not appear by chance. We do not become one another's mothers without intention, without yearning for it. The letter to the Colossians tells us to clothe ourselves with compassion. This is something we must decide to do. We must intentionally take off the clothes of selfishness, and instead put on the clothes of Christ. This means that in the middle of our anxiety and distress we must put our attention on God, on Jesus, on beauty, on virtue, and let these things transform us into becoming a family of love together.

All the evil things we see in the world, both near and far off, will eventually end. But as St Paul wrote, love never ends. Even in the wreckage after evil has done its worst, faith remains, and hope remains, and love remains. And the greatest of these, says Paul, is love – a mother's love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and yes, endures all things.

It is now just three weeks until Easter. The story of Jesus's death and Resurrection tells us that despair doesn't win, and selfishness doesn't win. For now, though, we are still in Lent, the Cross is ahead of us, and the worst is yet to come. But Easter is coming. For we are one another's mothers, and our Love cannot be held back.