

Sermon for Mothering Sunday, 15th March 2026, Year A, Lent 4

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Colossians 3:12-17; John 19:25b-27

Sermon

I don't know about you, but I don't find Mother's Day to be the most comfortable day in the Church's calendar. Some might even say, like Provost Kelvin on Facebook, that Mother's Day is a foreign import and today we should be celebrating the fourth Sunday of Lent, otherwise known as Laetare Sunday, or Refreshment Sunday – that Sunday in the middle of Lent when we turn from Lenten sorrows to allow ourselves a brief moment of rejoicing.

Others might insist that today is not Mother's Day, but Mothering Sunday – the day on which people traditionally celebrated their 'Mother Church' by returning to the church in which they were baptised. But still, it has become, in modern culture, a time to honour our mothers - those who birthed or raised us - and whether this is a joyful or sad day now depends on whether our mothers are still alive, and in good health, and if we have or had a good relationship with them, or if our memories are happy or painful.

So, it's not the easiest Sunday to preach on, and looking back and reviewing my previous Mothering Sunday sermons doesn't make it any easier.

The Scottish Episcopal Church has a cycle of bible readings that repeats every three years. This means that I can review any sermon I wrote three or six years ago with the knowledge that it was inspired by the very same bible readings we are encountering today. And so, I was reminded that Mothering Sunday in 2020 was our first full week in Covid lockdown, before they even forced churches to close. I was still in my curacy and my first year of priesthood, and my rector and I celebrated Holy Communion together on our own in St Mawgan church in

Cornwall, and I did my best to preach to the congregation online about Mothering Sunday when many grandmothers were now banned from even being in the presence of their grown up children, let alone able to hug them or kiss their grandchildren.

We perhaps didn't realise at the time how much we needed the simple reassurance of giving or receiving a human touch of friendship until we were no longer allowed to come closer than two metres to one other.

What we did come to realise, however, was that the Christian faith had quite a lot to say in times of crisis. In fact, almost all of what it says was born in *response* to trauma and crisis. The more suffering the early Christians endured, the more they became known for loving one another.

Here in our gospel reading we see Jesus, the friend and teacher who healed crowds by touch, and visited homes and ate with everyone especially unclean sinners, and who joined the crowds at the temple and at weddings, suddenly separated from his own mother by the vastness of the distance caused by the cruel, inhuman Cross. Mary cannot approach. Her love yearns and burns stronger than ever for her son, but even she cannot cross that gap.

And then death, for a while, makes the chasm even larger.

This is the awful separation which the Christian faith is born specifically to address. Death is the great enemy that Christ has overcome. Death separates, but Heaven brings everything together.

The promise of Heaven is entirely about relationship. Jesus tells the repentant criminal crucified alongside him that 'today you will be *with me* in paradise.' Love is never something we pursue by ourselves for ourselves. Even as Jesus is dying, his concern is that his mother Mary is sustained in love, supported in community. "Woman, here is your son. Disciple, here is your mother."

Early Church communities continued to focus their attention on the quality of their relationships. While the Gnostic heretics in the first and second centuries were more comfortable with seeking individual insight and often denied the value of relationships, true Christian teaching was always about discovering God in one another.

Our reading from Colossians is a perfect example of this. Paul says God's chosen ones are characterised by being 'holy and beloved.' We are to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. We must bear with one another, forgive one another, be bound together in harmony, teach and admonish one another in wisdom. And then with gratitude in our hearts sing praises together to God.

Paul apparently thinks it's quite easy to become this sort of person - as simple as 'taking off' one set of clothing and 'putting on' another. In this he is quite similar to the various Greek moralists of his time who taught their audiences to recognise and avoid vices, while seeking to embody the virtues.

But most of us know that it's not straightforward to simply change one set of deeply ingrained behaviours for another, even when we have Christ as our example and a yearning for Heaven as an inspiration. Even monks and nuns, who literally take off old clothing and put on new 'habits' when they join a religious community, find that their old behaviours cannot simply be discarded like a dirty pair of socks. If they were mean and grumpy outside the monastery, they will surely be mean and grumpy inside, at least for a while. It can take years, if ever, for the person inside the habit to become as holy as the clothing makes them appear. Trust me, I know this from experience.

In the middle of our bible passage, however, Paul suddenly changes his metaphors. Instead of transformation coming from our own efforts, now Paul tells us to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts and the word of Christ to

dwell in us richly. We've gone from a focus on external behaviours to letting Christ transform us from within.

I must admit I've often spent time pondering how exactly the Christian faith makes us more Christlike, because more than anything I want to be compassionate, kind, humble, patient and forgiving, and part of a community that aspires to all these virtues, and which longs to be an authentic community of love. But how do we get there? Should we each follow religious behaviour rules, and trust that eventually we will become on the inside what our religion constrains us to be on the outside? 'Fake it till you make it' as someone once said. Or should we pray for God's Spirit to act within our hearts, transforming our behaviours from the inside out, and not be anxious, but trust that God will achieve by grace what we cannot manage by our own strength?

It won't surprise any of you to learn that I tend to favour the latter approach. I've never really trusted that simply imitating good behaviours, even trying to imitate Christ, will naturally lead to a loving heart. We only have to look at the disciples to see that what truly transformed them was not trying to imitate Jesus, which left them arguing over who was the greatest, but receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which made them willing to lay down their lives for Love.

If Mothering Sunday is about anything, it must be about the preciousness of human relationships, and our experience of being loved by the one who gave us life. Yes, it is also about our gratitude for those particularly special people who birthed us into the world, and those who raised us, but it is also a reminder that our faith is fundamentally about deepening our relationships with one another in a vast tapestry of open-hearted interconnections. For Jesus did not say to his mother, 'now remember to keep all the rules and the teachings I have given you,' but rather, 'here is your son... and from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.'