

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – Fourth Sunday of Lent – 14th March 2021

Mothering Sunday

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Happy Mothering Sunday to all of you!

Some of you might think that this festival does not concern you, either because you are not a mother, or because, sadly, your mother is not with you anymore. Do not be dismayed: this springtime celebration is for all of us.

This fourth Sunday in Lent, known also as Laetare Sunday, should be a day of relaxation from normal Lenten rigour. It is the second “Rejoice” Sunday in the liturgical calendar, the other one being the third Sunday in Advent, Gaudete Sunday. On both occasions rose (rather than purple) vestments can be worn by priests. The name comes from the first words in Latin of the Introit for the day, from the Book of the prophet Isaiah: “Laetare Hierusalem” – “Rejoice with Jerusalem; and be glad for her: rejoice with her, you who mourn over her; that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast.” (Isaiah 66.10-11) - metaphors of consoling and nurturing mothers, and good news of sorrow changed into joy.

Drawing inspiration from one of the psalms set for the day, “I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord!” (Ps 122.1), it became a tradition, in the Middle Ages, for people to return to their mother church for a special service, that is, to the church where they had been baptised, or to the nearest cathedral. Anyone who did so, was known to have gone “mothering”.

In later times, servants were given the day off to visit their families, as well as their mother churches. They brought along posies and simnel cakes.

100 years ago, Constance Penswick Smith revived the observance of Mothering Sunday in the British Isles, as an occasion for honouring the Mother Church, mothers of earthly homes, Mary, mother of Jesus, and the gifts of Mother Earth.

You will have noticed that, in recent years, Mothering Sunday, outside the Church, has been overtaken by consumerism – but it remains, nevertheless, an occasion to celebrate the care and love we have received in our lives.

Mothering Sunday is not solely about our mothers, much as we value and honour them. You might be acquainted with this saying: “It takes a village to raise a child.” In other words, each of us has needed more mothering than any one mother could ever provide – and we still need to be mothered, regardless of our age.

The book of Exodus tells us about the desperate, sacrificial, attentive, protective, loyal, serving, welcoming, generous mothering, that Moses received in his early childhood.

Like Moses, we all have been shaped by our experiences of being mothered, regardless of who provided that care: people who have protected us, enabled us to learn our purpose in life, have loved us enough to let us go our own way, have been a model of trust and faith, those who have shown us where we are rooted, what gives us life, those who have forgiven us, have tended to our wounds, have stood with us in times of great suffering. I dare say this should also be the care a mother church provides.

It may seem strange that on a day when we are called to rejoice, the Gospel reading presents us with such an abyss of pain: a dying, tortured son, a mother whose heart is breaking, and followers who are bewildered and in despair.

It is, nevertheless, a story of hope and of forward looking. Jesus entrusts Mary and the disciple to one another. At the very moment of being overwhelmed and having the story of one’s life stripped of everything that has held it together, the journey out of abyss is made possible. A new community, a new family, a new fellowship of God’s people is born through the shedding of Christ’s blood, a community of Cross and Resurrection, of faith and hope, a community that we call Church.

The Church was born on the foundation laid by Jesus Christ who conquered sin, injustice, violence, hatred and death on the cross. This is the mothering Church, where Christ’s disciples are bound together by the recognition of one another’s humanity and the need both to give and to receive love.

We are called into this new family, into this “one body”, as St Paul reminds us, as “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved”. This is a community of mutual belonging and everlasting love that has its source in God’s immeasurable love. Sadly, the church has failed many times to live up to this Gospel of love and respect and care for each other.

I strongly believe that we don’t only belong to the Church family for our own and this family’s good. We are to be God’s holy people for our broken world, feeling the pain of its suffering, willing to sacrifice something of ourselves in order to allow God’s purposes for the world to be brought to birth.

Saint Paul’s standards for a Christian community are very high: it should be compassionate, kind, humble, meek, patient, forgiving, loving, thankful, wise ... There is no such thing as a perfect family – or a perfect church. Like any family, we disagree, we fall out, we hurt each other ... If you feel tempted to strive for perfection, to score high as a church, remember the wisdom of the psalmist: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.” (Ps 127.1)

Some of you are not acquainted with Marseille’s landmark, the Our Lady of the Guard basilica, perched on a hill overlooking the old port. It is much more than an attractive site for tourists and pilgrims. For the Marseillais, she is “la Bonne Mère”, the Good Mother. The bell tower supports a gilded 11 metres tall statue of Mary, that can be seen from all over the city. The Virgin is shown as a “Hodegetria” Mother of God, “the One who shows the way”: she directs attention away from herself and presents Jesus to the world as the source of salvation. Not many people know that, inside the statue, there is a spiral staircase to the Virgin’s head and that the few lucky ones who get permission to do the ascent can look at the world through the eyes of Mary, who keeps attentive, loving and compassionate watch over the city, with its history of hardship, sharp social divides and strong aspirations to a better life, and, of course, over the seafarers. She watches over those who are near, and those who are far, over those who “belong”, and those who do not. Perhaps there is something for our chaplaincy to learn from “la Bonne Mère”.

As someone who has lived for nearly half of their life at a 2000-km-distance away from their extended family, I like the idea that family are the people God gives us to look after and those who look after us. That is, people we mother and people who mother us.

Let us all do a bit of “mothering” today! No one should be left out of today’s rejoicing.

In these times, when we have been separated from one another and/or could not interact as we would normally do, we have carried on being a Church family in a different way, and many among us have discovered a renewed sense of belonging. Some bonds have become stronger.

Yet we should not be inward looking – this will only reveal the limits of our own resources, and lead to fear and isolation. Let us look out from ourselves with love and hope. Let us be a community that shows attentiveness in care and nurturing to all those we encounter and to all who turn to us. Through the blood Jesus Christ shed for us on the Cross, we are blood relations. But let us not forget that his blood has been shed for us and for many.

Let our life be shared and given. Let our life together be one of hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore transforming the present. And let us always stand near the Cross of Jesus, the place where transformation begins.

Amen.