

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon

Fourth Sunday of Lent – Mothering Sunday - 10th March 2024

Oppède and Manosque

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

For many people, Mothering Sunday conjures up images of a joyful day of celebration in the midst of the otherwise sombre time of Lent, a day when flowers are presented, families brought together, children run riot in church, meals are shared, cards exchanged, loving words spoken, good memories shared. Let us hope that for many people this is a truly happy day.

But it's also a day that is less than straightforward. While the figure of a mother is marked into every human life, experiences of mothering are different. For some, whether we are mothers or children, this is a day when an absence is felt, through loss or grief, or loss of relationship. For others, there is memory or actuality of wanting to become mothers and it not being possible, or of it turning out to be a struggle when it happens. For others still, there's the experience of not having felt called to be mothers and feeling judged because of it. And not forgetting fathers who are not in a position to celebrate this day with the mothers of their children. It can be a complicated day, and our prayers on this day are always with those who struggle because of it.

Today's Bible readings highlight three aspects of motherhood that we might reflect on as we continue our journey through Lent. The first, highlighted in our Old Testament reading, is courage. The woman in the story is not named, though in the book of Numbers we learn that her name is Jochebed, the mother of Moses. Her brave actions save the life of her child. She is part of an enslaved people, the ancient Israelites in Egypt. Just before the reading begins, Pharaoh has issued an order to the midwives who attend Israelite women that, in order to control the enslaved population, male children are to be killed at birth. And so the baby in this story is in danger of violence, both racially motivated and gender-based. This is mothering in highly precarious conditions. The choices Jochebed makes are recognisable to women across the world, not least today in Ukraine or Gaza.

Whether or not we are mothers ourselves, Jochebed's story asks us on this Mothering Sunday what we will fight to save, even when we think we can do so little. For whom will we stick our necks out, take action to protect? For whom or what will we challenge the system, be creative in getting round the rules?

The second aspect of motherhood, highlighted in our Gospel reading, is suffering. Any mother will tell you that it comes as part of the package. The picture which the Gospels give us is of Mary. In our reading, she brings her baby to the Temple to present him to the Lord, as required under the religious law. She is amazed by the reactions her child inspires in people. But she is also told that she will suffer – 'a sword will pierce through your own soul'.

Mothering Sunday, through this short reading about Mary, asks of us who or what it is that allows our souls to be pierced through by the consequences and demands of love. What breaks our heart open so that it never closes again to

the rest of the world? As The Revd Lucy Winkett, Rector of St James's Piccadilly in London, once put it: 'To love like that is to give expression to something of the fierce, self-giving, ... patient, creative love that's holding the stars apart and the universe in being, and that became incarnate and visible in Christ, and Christ crucified - the fullness of divine love, whose fingerprint is on every soul'¹.

Mary saw her son grow up, leave home, become an inspiration to his followers and a whole community. Yet, in doing so, he incurred jealousy, fear and anger from the religious and political leaders of his time, which reached its peak in Jerusalem in the week we call Holy. His mother walked with him – as we shall do in heart and mind that week – through betrayal, arrest, torture, trial, crucifixion and death. Tragically, sometimes it comes as part of the package. Ask the mother of Alexei Navalny.

The picture at the top of your service sheets is of Michelangelo's Pietà, Mary cradling her crucified son. Later this year, another Pietà will become visible to the world again. I wonder if you know it. It's in the sanctuary of Notre-Dame de Paris which, God willing, will open to the public in December for the first time after the devastating fire of 2018. The face on the statue of Michelangelo has a stillness about it, Mary's head bowed as if in prayer. The face on the statue in Notre-Dame is nothing like it. On her face is a look of sheer anguish, and from her mouth there comes a silent scream. The Pietà in Notre Dame tells of all the heartache and desolation of the human condition. When you are close to it, that is all you can see.

But there's a third aspect of motherhood, highlighted in our New Testament reading. Just as in parenting God invites us to share in his work of creating, so he also invites us to share in his work of healing. The third aspect touched upon

¹ Reading the Bible with your Feet (2021).

in our New Testament reading is consolation, something mothers are very good at giving. Something that reflects the God in whose image we are made. If, on your way out of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, you look back at the Pietà, you may notice something you did not see when you were too close to its agony. On either side of Mary are two small figures – two angels, sorrowful but determined. They do not touch her, yet they hold her between them, silently watching, willing her on. They offer a reminder that we are held in the divine embrace even through the worst that can happen to us. A reminder that, in the words of St Paul, nothing can separate us from the love of God, ‘the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled’ (2 Corinthians 3 - 4).

It is significant that the two angels (traditionally, messengers of God) are to be found at the point in time that lies between crucifixion and resurrection. When we get to Holy Week, we will find God, where we always do, at the foot of the Cross, and in the life beyond it revealed at Easter. For resurrection is about the eternal re-generativity of God. And, seen in its light, the crucifixion offers us the assurance that in Christ evil and suffering are absorbed, transformed and finally defeated.

So as we give thanks today for mothering, with all its joys and challenges, we will shortly turn to celebrate the Eucharist, in which Christ’s body will become our food and we in turn will become the body of Christ, sent out into the world to become his feet, hands and eyes, to bring comfort to those in the dark valley. Sent out with courage to confront suffering with consolation - and perhaps, in doing so, find consolation ourselves.

Amen.