

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon

Fourth Sunday of Lent – 10th March 2024

All Saints' Marseille

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'At last, in spite of all, a recognition,
For those who loved and laboured for so long,
Who brought us, through that labour, to fruition
To flourish in the place where we belong.'

These lines are drawn from Malcolm Guite's poem for Mothering Sunday – a day on the Church's calendar when we seek to give thanks for our mothers, reminiscing about the shared joys and tears over the years, moments of celebration or sorrow, reflecting on how their love shaped our life journey. We honour our mothers - and all the world's mothers - whose work, in Guite's words, 'the world has overlooked, neglected, but in their lives [God's] Kingdom is reflected.' Being a mother is undeniably one of the most demanding, challenging, heart-wrenching, anxiety-inducing, yet joyful jobs in the world. Whatever we try to express today will inevitably fall short of articulating the true value of a mother – if such worth could ever be quantified. A Jewish proverb offers a wise insight: 'God could not be everywhere, and therefore he made mothers.'

The Scriptures offer a rich collection of maternal figures, each one a unique and intricate portrait: from Sarah, mother of Isaac, to Hagar, mother of Ismael; from Jochebed, mother of Moses, to Hannah, mother of Samuel; from Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, to Mary, mother of Jesus, among many others. These women exemplified endurance, patience, hope, and selflessness; they loved their children with boundless affection and placed unreserved trust in God's purpose.

The Church has idealised Mary as the epitome of motherhood, a portrayal that Christian devotion has oversimplified and sentimentalised over the centuries. However, the Mary depicted in the Bible is a complex figure with whom many women and mothers can identify: Mary, who shows extraordinary courage, faith and trust, so that she can say 'yes' to God when so many would have said 'no'. Mary, who risks shame and rejection to fulfil her calling to give birth to the Messiah. Mary, who must become a refugee in Egypt to escape king Herod's wrath. Mary, who encourages the first of Jesus' signs at the wedding at Cana by not contenting herself with her Son's refusal. Mary, whom Jesus later apparently ignores, telling his followers that his family are those who do the will of God, not those related by blood. Mary, who remains nevertheless at the Cross, when so many of Jesus' friends and disciples have fled.

Mary's role as the mother of Jesus is captured in today's brief yet moving passage from Luke's Gospel: Mary, a new mother, finds herself in the Temple, overwhelmed by the reaction her child provokes. She receives a prophetic word from Simeon, who foretells that her son will be responsible for the falling and rising of many, and ominously predicts that she will endure anguish, as 'a sword will pierce [her] own soul too.' Through Simeon's words, the future suffering of Jesus, culminating in his passion and death, are subtly foreshadowed. Did Mary remember these words at the foot of the Cross?

These few lines encapsulate the two iconic images of Mary: firstly, as the nurturing mother, holding her infant son, a subject depicted in countless paintings and icons. Secondly as the Pietà: following the crucifixion, Mary cradles Jesus once more, now as a broken adult. This dual portrayal mirrors the complex reality of motherhood today, as read or seen in news headlines: mothers in situations of violence, a plight familiar to women worldwide, the piercing agony of helplessly witnessing their children suffer or die.

The glimpses offered by the Gospels into the life of Mary suggest that the mother of Jesus grappled with the difficult task of letting her child go, much like Hannah did with Samuel. By allowing Samuel to leave her, Hannah played her role in fulfilling God's plan for him as a judge and prophet of Israel. As Mary saw Jesus departing from Nazareth, his path inevitably leading towards Jerusalem and Golgotha, she knew this was part of God's purpose for him, understanding that her role was to let him go.

Mothering means nurturing, loving, caring – and letting go. To help someone's journey towards fulfilling their own calling from God, we must, in a spirit of love,

release our hold. And this is not only the task of mothers, but the work of an entire community: parents, grandparents, extended family, friends, teachers, churches... Assuming a 'mothering' role is not about imposing our own needs or ideals or ambitions upon those we care for. While their values and paths may not align with our aspirations for them, we, like Mary and Hannah, must place our trust in God's purpose. 'Letting go' is hard and challenging, but often essential to pave the way for a return.

The passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians serves as a reminder that all love has its source in the boundless love of God. All consolation comes from God, 'the Father of mercies', and it flows abundantly to us, so that we may extend it to others. This serves as our 'mission letter' to become a 'mothering' church: a place of safety and nurture, where people can explore and question, discover who they truly are and discern where God might be calling them. A place where people can make mistakes, know themselves forgiven, a place where fresh beginnings are embraced. A place where people are empowered to flourish as members of a community of love and service. A 'mothering' church lets people go out into the world with confidence and courage, to face its challenges and illuminate it with the light of Christ - knowing that they are always welcome to return for refreshment and renewal.

This is our 'mission letter': to uphold our responsibility towards one another; to create a place of mutual accountability, where our ability to forgive, practise patience, and extend compassion is continuously expanded by God's grace; to share with one another the duty and work of care and nurture, as well as the joys and challenges of life.

On this day, let us pray that God may guide us in discovering and nurturing more deeply our gifts for 'mothering', so that others may catch a glimpse of God's generous and transforming love, and that in our lives, too, his Kingdom may be reflected.

Amen.