

'Laetare' Sunday- Mothering Sunday (14th March 2021)

I hope some of you saw my suggestion that we come to today's service with a symbol of rejoicing. Perhaps a flower in a glass on the kitchen table or wherever you are sitting, a brightly coloured top or shirt, even an open window to let in the fresh air. Today is *Laetare* Sunday – the middle Sunday of Lent and a day when we relax any penitential discipline we might have undertaken for Lent as we rejoice in our mother the church. There was a lovely mediaeval tradition in village churches that the whole congregation would gather outside around the church building – symbolically embracing our mother Church. It's called *Laetere* from Latin to 'rejoice' and in the centuries before the reformation we would have chanted Isaiah 66 which begins:

"Rejoice (*laetere*) with Jerusalem and be glad for her,
all you who love her;
rejoice greatly with her,
all you who mourn over her.

For you will nurse and be satisfied
at her comforting breasts;
you will drink deeply
and delight in her overflowing abundance."

The tradition of rejoicing in our mother the church became, by extension a day on which to celebrate our earthly mothers and so today we honour our mothers – all of them.

The Exodus reading challenges us with a radical view of who a mother actually is. It's worth remembering that Moses' story is set in a time when the Egyptian state was practising a policy of genocide. Pharaoh had decreed that all new-born Hebrew boys were to be murdered at birth, only the girls would live. With no boys growing up to become fathers, within a generation there would be no more Hebrew babies and Pharaoh would have solved his Jewish problem. But when Moses was born the midwives ignored the law and instead of killing him, allowed his mother to keep him. They were the first women to love and protect Moses - to 'mother' him. His own mother risked her life to keep him hidden for 3 months - and then came up with a plan to save him.

Pharaoh's daughter was the third 'mother' in Moses' life when she made the compassionate decision to adopt him, and Moses's older sister Miriam played her part - innocently suggesting that their mother would make the perfect nurse for an abandoned baby. Before Moses was 4 months old four different women had protected and nurtured him - three of them at the risk of their own lives. Moses had four mothers - a fourfold blessing which doesn't detract from the significance of the love of his biological mother. Many of us will remember loving, nurturing people in our lives who have complemented, or even assumed, the role of mother.

I want to touch briefly on three mothers of our time:

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the British Iranian author who has been separated from her husband and daughter for 5 years and although recently released from prison, today, March 14, faces new charges in Iran. She has shown courage, forbearance and dignity, and we honour her as a courageous loving biological mother.

Secondly may we remember the actions of 'Sister Ann', a Catholic nun in Myanmar. Last week, when military police roamed her city of Myitkyina she unselfconsciously knelt in the street begging the soldiers to shoot her instead of the young people for whom they were searching.

And thirdly, the hidden mother figures; young carers who look after their parents; teachers who nurture their charges, all those who unobtrusively nurture others without the bonds and recognition of a parental relationship.

For all of them mothering comes at a cost. Simeon tells Mary, 'a sword will pierce your own soul too.' This is not the beautiful poetic phrase TS Eliot made of it. It is brutal. For those parents who have spent the past year home-schooling children as well as holding together jobs, relationships and your own peace of mind - we don't underestimate the cost. 'A sword will pierce your own soul.'

But the sacrifices you all make are crucial, cross shaped. The four women who nurtured Moses didn't know that he would become a parent to his people, providing the founding mythology of the Judaeo Christian religion. It was Moses who according to the Old Testament led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt; provided them with miraculous food and water; dried up the Red Sea, Ten Commandments and led them to the brink of the promised land. He never saw the end of the story. Like all good mothers, he led them and taught them until could manage without him - and then he left them.

Many of us are now without our mothers; some of us will have had difficult relationships with them but I hope there have been people in all our lives to whom we have been able to turn, people who have advised and encouraged and led us until we can find our way on our own. For all of them, for all of you and for the way in which you reflect and channel the mothering love of God, today is a day of thanksgiving and rejoicing.