

## **Sermon for Sunday 16 March 2023**

### **Mothering Sunday**

**Exodus 2: 1 – 10; 2 Corinthians 1: 3 – 7; Luke 2: 33 – 35**

I think I should start today by admitting my own ambivalence about Mothering Sunday. It is lovely to receive flowers in church – and all the ladies here today will be given daffodils. When my children were small – and I was a ‘stay at home’ mum – it was nice to receive some recognition of all the hard work 24/7 and 7 days a week.

But I’m very aware, that for many people, for all sorts of different reasons, this can be a very painful day.

I was interested to discover that one of the founders of the American Mother’s Day, Anna Jarvis, remained unmarried and childless her whole life. She started Mother’s Day wanting to honour the achievements of her own mother, Ann Reeves Jarvis. Not because she was a wonderful mother (though she may have been).

But because she started clubs to teach other women how to better look after their children and she invented Mother’s Friendship Day to promote reconciliation between former Union and Confederate soldiers. Anna Jarvis was determined to see a Mother’s Day holiday added to the calendar in the US, arguing that American holidays were biased towards male achievements. It finally became official in 1914.

By 1920 Anna Jarvis had become so disgusted with the commercialisation of the holiday that she began campaigning against Mother’s Day profiteers. I rather agree with her!

We are now much more aware of the many achievements of women besides motherhood, and keen to celebrate them. As examples, I’ve been very interested recently to discover a beautiful self-portrait in the National Gallery by Elisabeth Vigee-Lebrun – painted in 1782. And just last week, in a exhibition of Spanish art we discovered two very moving sculptures of Mary and Christ by another woman, Andrea de Mena. They were made in 1675.

There are of course many unseen women in the Bible. We know they were there even if we don't know much about them. We briefly met three of them in our first reading, from Exodus. Moses' mother, his sister and Pharaoh's daughter. Moses is three months old. His family have kept him hidden up to this point, because his family were slaves in Egypt. Because the Hebrew people were too numerous all Hebrew boy babies were supposed to be put to death at birth. It's no longer possible to hide him. So his mother and sister hatch a plan to save him. Perhaps they have heard good things about Pharaoh's daughter. Maybe she has already done some acts of kindness towards the Hebrew slaves. Moses' mother hides the baby in a basket in a place where the princess will find him, leaving her daughter to see what happens and intervene at the right moment. The princess sees the child and makes a decision. She's not fooled. She knows this is one of the children her father has ordered to be killed, and yet she takes him into her own household. Quite probably she guesses

too that the woman who is paid to be his nurse is his real mother.

The three women in our story are courageous and bold. They refuse to do as they are told and instead do what is right. Pharaoh's daughter, who is not his biological mother, also plays her part in raising him and equipping him for his future role as leader of his people. While they are in the background, they have an important part to play in God's plan to rescue His people.

They are successful in what they seek to do. His mother and sister must have been relieved and delighted that Moses was saved.

But Mary, Mother of Jesus, the most famous woman in the Bible – perhaps the most famous woman of all time, also features in our readings today. Her story is rather different. We heard Simeon's strange and unsettling words to her when Jesus was presented in the Temple as a baby. "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your

own soul too.” They remind us of the suffering of Mary. For her, to complete what God asked of her meant seeing her beloved Son crucified.

To love deeply and in a committed way and to live out that love always involves suffering at some point. That is just the way life is. But beyond that we are all called, as followers of Jesus, to a life that may involve suffering. Jesus said ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’ (Mark 8: 34). He never said it was going to be easy to live out our faith in the world.

The Apostle Paul knew this well. In our reading from his letter he talks about his own suffering and also about the suffering of the Christians in Corinth. We know about the beatings and imprisonments that Paul experienced. We don’t know exactly what was going on in Corinth, but there may have been riots, false accusations against Christians in court, imprisonment or homes and businesses broken up. What Paul is keen to point out is the connection between suffering for our faith and consolation. He calls

God “the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation who consoles us in all our afflictions”. As we are consoled by God, he says, we are also able to pass on God’s consolation to others (1 Corinthians 2: 3 -4).

Perhaps it feels as if we have travelled a long way from those Mothering Sunday daffodils that I began with.

Let us give thanks today for all those who have cared for us and nurtured us at different stages of our life, whoever they are – mothers, fathers, step-parents, grandparents, friends and wise older adults. And let us remember to pray for those who suffer, for whatever reason, as they live out their faith. Pray that they may know the consolation of the Father of all mercies.

Amen

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