

Mothering Sunday

A sermon preached by Bishop Jo to camera at St Mary's Shalford, for the whole family of the diocese of Guildford on Sunday 22nd March 2020

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to John

Glory to you, O Lord

²⁵And that is what the soldiers did.

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

(John 19:25-27)

This is the Gospel of the Lord

Praise to you, O Christ

What a challenging gospel for Mothering Sunday! Our reading describes the hardest thing imaginable for a mother, for a parent: watching the child you've raised, the one to whom you've helped bring life, dying. Worse still, Mary is unable to do anything to prevent it; she can only watch on, passive. Just as Simeon had forewarned when Mary brought the baby Jesus to the temple for dedication: 'and a sword will pierce your own soul too.' Here is the sword, and the piercing, and a soul that is weeping.

And what a challenging Mothering Sunday this is in our land. For many of us we are separated from our mothers, prevented from travelling while they're prevented from contact owing to the coronavirus. That includes my mother, aged 90, living alone and holed up in West Yorkshire right now – though this technology probably mean she gets to see her daughter preach as her mother's day gift. Meanwhile there are other mothers who find themselves cooped up with their children, wondering how on earth they're going to get through the rest of the day let alone the next 12 weeks without the normal structures of daily life. And with all the added health anxieties, both mental and physical, and financial insecurity and so on. There is a sword piercing the heart of our nation, the heart of our world right now. And we wonder how we can go on, if we can go on, and what the future might look like when we get there. The world as we know it is changing and we wonder what is secure.

Let's stand with Mary at the cross for a moment – maintaining the recommended 2m distance of course - to share her agony and to express our agonies there too. (I might pause for a moment and invite you to voice: What is it that brings you to watch or wait or weep today? I encourage you to express it). Mary doesn't run away because it's unbearable: she holds still, fully present to the agony. Be inspired by this mother: by her courage, her guts. Even in the midst of his own agony on the cross, Jesus is present to her: he sees her, he acknowledges her, he listens. That doesn't instantly take all pain away, but the sharing of pain does make it more bearable. When it is understood we realise we're not alone. We may feel isolated by it – indeed we may quite literally be self-isolating – but Mary discovers there are others around her at the cross (a seemingly random mix of relatives, friends and other disciples). And above all there is Jesus who, even from the cross - in that ultimate place of pain - reaches out to us in ours.

And what does Jesus say? To Mary, his own dear mother, he says, 'Behold your son' – pointing to someone else, pointing to the beloved disciple.

And in the same gesture Jesus calls to the disciple. Notice he doesn't say, 'behold my mother'. He says 'behold your mother'.

Jesus' final gesture is to unite two unrelated people, to make them one. Just as Mary gave life to Jesus, so now Jesus directs her to give life to the beloved disciple, to bring Jesus to birth, as it were, within him, so that the disciple may dwell in Jesus and Jesus in him. And at the same time he's calling the beloved disciple to become the son for his mother, to become Jesus for his mother.

Jesus is doing nothing less than establishing a new understanding of family, a new connectivity between two otherwise unrelated people except that now they are related through Jesus. This is the power of the new covenant in Christ, of the bond of fellowship that he calls forth among those who follow him. Jesus' final gesture is to bring Mary and the beloved disciple into oneness, to create a covenant of love between them, even in the midst of great pain.

If you are someone who finds Mothering Sunday painful – it may be you no longer have a mother, or you've been unable to become a mother, or perhaps you yourself have suffered the experience of watching a precious child die – know first and foremost that Jesus sees and knows and understands.

And hear Jesus' words to you as to his mother, as to his beloved disciple: 'look, here is your child'. 'Look, here is your mother'.

I wonder, who are those gathering at the cross, the place of dereliction, the place of deep pain today, to whom Jesus might be redirecting your gaze. I wonder who might be nearby who feels the lack of family, the isolation of grief – yet with whom you may be united?

You might call the day of crucifixion, in traumatic circumstances, a mother's day to be remembered. I wonder, how can today become a mother's day to be remembered? Is there a mother along your street? Might there be a beloved child to whom you can bring the life and love of Jesus? These extraordinary circumstances allow opportunity for us to show the extraordinary love of Jesus – far more contagious and infectious than the coronavirus! - his compassion and care for those in pain, and his radical redefinition of what it means to be one family through his death. Let's celebrate mother's day in a radical way this year!

God of compassion,
whose Son Jesus Christ, the child of Mary,
shared the life of a home in Nazareth,
and on the cross drew the whole human family to himself:
strengthen us in our daily living
that in joy and in sorrow
we may know the power of your presence
to bind together and to heal;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.