

## Mothering Sunday 2021

Although I no longer need to buy cards for Mothering Sunday, because both my mother and my mother in law died some years ago, I couldn't fail to notice how many cards there are in the shops which bear the legend "Happy Mother's Day". One would be hard put to find one which says, "Happy Mothering Sunday", yet there is a great deal of difference between these two understandings of what this day signifies.

Whilst there is at one level nothing wrong with keeping Mother's Day as a day on which we celebrate the unique contribution which mothers make to society, and we do all have mothers, at least biologically; but to call it "Mother's Day" is to make it somewhat exclusive, and misses the true depth of the resonances which is encapsulated by the term "Mothering Sunday".

Mother's Day can be a day of particular difficulty for those who very much want children, or have a mother, but do not have one. It is difficult, too, for those who are facing this "mother's day" as the first one without a child, or without their mother.

"Mothering Sunday" however, carries within it the concept of something much richer and broader, something in which we can all share: Jesus said, "Who are my mother and my brothers and sisters? Those who do the will of God and keep it, they are my mother, brother and sister."

People sometimes describe a mother's love as "sacrificial and self-giving", which has clear parallels with God's love for us and, although we might not wish to go so far as to call God "mother", as Julian of Norwich did, these images of God do work, in that they give us cause to celebrate motherhood in its broadest sense.

The writer Sally McFague defines mothering as being "anything that creates the space or the conditions for another life to grow and thrive. And mothering is the attitude that blesses the other and says, "it is good that you exist."

Motherhood is epitomised, I would say, in the person of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Here is a girl who said yes to God and gave birth in the most difficult of circumstances, risking the condemnation of Jewish society. She watched as visitors barged into the stable and she allowed strangers to come in and worship her new-born son. She received wise men later, and their gifts, symbolizing her baby's greatness, but also foreshadowing his death.

As he grew up, she saw Jesus stir up hatred, opposition and controversy; and, of course, she watched as Jesus was led to his death on a cross.

As far as we can see, all the time throughout these events, she affirmed and supported her son.

The mother of Jesus therefore stands as an archetype, a symbol of all our waiting; for all who persevere through hard times; for all who observe and who have experienced the Golgotha truth of life.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, embodies the waiting, lingering activity of parents whose child is ill or who has died tragically, or those who have been lost or killed

in one of the many wars which have blight our world. She stands and waits with those who stand at the hospital or hospice bed of a loved-one.

Yet God, as our Mother and father also understands and shares in the joy and wonder of family life, in all its richness and diversity and, like any good parent, delights in us as we grow to maturity in relationship with Him and one another.

Good parenting is demonstrated by Mary at the wedding at Caana, when she says, "Do whatever he tells you", clearly recognising Jesus' adulthood and competence; yet how delightfully human her and Joseph's reaction is when, having mislaid Jesus for a while while on the journey to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival, are puzzled when they find him in the temple. They clearly didn't understand what he was doing there and were taken by surprise that their son had knowledge they didn't expect him to have.

Our Mothering Sunday readings place us firmly in the real world, and remind us that God's parenting is no false, demanding image, but the real thing - the parenting we need for our survival and growth into healthy maturity. Yes, we hear of terrible, tragic situations of heartache in today's readings, but they are redeemed by God's parenting love. As St Paul says, God is the one who comforts us in all our troubles. We don't have to pretend with God that there aren't any troubles, because God knows what life is about. He knows the heartaches and the conflicts. He knows that loving makes us vulnerable.

I have often said to my patients in hospital that the God I most relate to is not God as Almighty, all-powerful, omnipotent etc, but the vulnerable baby born in a stable, in a country with a harsh and punishing system of government which forced his refugee parents to seek safety for themselves and their child by fleeing to another country.

So let us give thanks and bless all those who have created the space and conditions to thrive and have blessed us with the words, "It is good that you exist".

Deacon Corinne