

# Mothering Sunday:

Sunday 22 March 2009

Rev Brian Senior

## Readings:

1 Samuel 1:20-28

Psalm 127

John 19:25-27

## Sermon

What's your first thought when you realise Mothering Sunday is coming up?:

- Daffodils in the garden?
- Cards in the shops?
- Dads suddenly remembering they forgot to get the children organised?
- Children realising they shouldn't have spent their pocket money on sweets?

Were the mothers here this morning looking forward to:

- Breakfast served on a tray?
- A large box of your favourite Chocolates?
- Big Cards with sloppy poems?
- Children waiting on you hand and foot?
- Bouquets of Exotic Flowers delivered to the door?

How many of you Mum's have experienced something of that so far today?

The reality, of course, can be very different.

Many of you mothers here this morning have had babies to feed, breakfast to get, lunch to prepare for, and have jobs still to be done when you get home from Church. I hope at the very least you'll be getting some help from the rest of the family.

But is that what Mothering Sunday is all about?

Mothering Sunday always occurs on the fourth Sunday of Lent. It has also been known as Mid-Lent Sunday – fairly obviously, since it falls half way through Lent ... or as Refreshment Sunday, or Laetare Sunday, because the Latin word, Laetare, means rejoice.

So why is Mothering Sunday a day for rejoicing?

Partly, perhaps, because it comes as a welcome break from the gloominess of Lent.

Of course Lent isn't *meant* to be gloomy ... just a thoughtful time ... a time of getting right with God and preparing ourselves for the great celebrations of the Easter Festival. But Lent is traditionally a time of penitence – or being sorry for our sins – and often people still think about 'giving up' something for Lent.

Has anyone here given something up for Lent? *What is it? Are you missing it?*

Giving something up is a way of reminding ourselves of how much we have, and how fortunate we are ... and it helps us to remember that all we have comes as a gift from God.

But it is worth considering whether *doing something* special for Lent might be even better than giving something up ... which is why at St Philip's lots of us are making a special effort to read through Mark's gospel during Lent, to help us think about Jesus and why he came, so that when Easter comes it is even more meaningful than usual.

So, if people often think of Lent as a time for 'giving up' something ... like chocolate, or sweets, or puddings ... then Mothering Sunday is an excuse for a break from all that. Often there are no flowers in Church during Lent ... *except on Mothering Sunday* ... so Mothering Sunday becomes an excuse for a bit of fun, and a time for celebration.

There are lots of traditions associated with Mothering Sunday, which date back as long ago as the 16th century. One tradition was that people were encouraged to return to worship in their 'mother church', where they had been baptised.

Of course people didn't move around so much in those days. I imagine if we had all gone back to the Church where we were baptised today, there would have been chaos on the roads as people drove all over the country.

Another tradition was that people who usually attended the local parish church, would make a longer journey to the 'mother church' of the Diocese ... the Cathedral ... so for people in Tunbridge Wells that would have meant a long trip to Rochester. Think about how long that would have taken when there were no cars, trains and buses.

Yet another tradition was that on Mothering Sunday people who were 'in service' ... servants in the grand houses of the rich ... were allowed time off from their domestic chores to visit their mothers and their families. Girls in service would often bake a cake to take home for their mothers as a gift ... often a light fruit cake covered in Marzipan, called a Simnel Cake, which was traditional for Easter.

All very interesting ... but not perhaps very relevant. Lots of those traditions have died out now ... although one remains strong. Often as they travelled home to visit their mothers, people would pick flowers from the fields to give them ... and though you could get arrested now for picking wild flowers, the florists and the supermarkets do a roaring trade in the week leading up to Mothering Sunday.

So is that it? Is that what Mothering Sunday is all about for us today?

Flowers which cost twice as much as usual, and a trip home to see Mum?

- Is it a time to indulge our mothers in gratitude for all they have done for us?
- Is it a sentimental time for sappy cards and flowers?
- Is it a time to celebrate the privilege of motherhood?
- Is it a time to think about motherhood as a calling?

Perhaps it is all those things .. and more.

Today Mothering Sunday has become a day when Christians choose to think about various aspects of motherhood:

- We give thanks for 'mother Church' which nurtures us in the Christian faith.
- We remember the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus.
- We give thanks for the gift of parenthood.
- We remember that God cares for us like a mother.
- ... and last, but not least, we give thanks for our own mothers.

So let's think for a moment about our readings this morning.

The first was from 1 Samuel chapter 1. So ... what sort of mother was Hannah?

Hannah had been the childless wife of a man with two wives ... and the other wife had provoked and mocked her. In a society where childlessness was seen as a curse from God, Hannah was desperate. She longed for a child ... she prayed for a child ... and she had even done a deal with God for a child. The bargain was along the lines of:

"God, if you give me a son, then I will give him back to serve you for the rest of his life."

God had answered Hannah's prayer, and her son was born, and she named him Samuel ... and after he was weaned she took him to Eli the priest, and left Samuel with him to serve the Lord in the temple as she had promised. Every year, Hannah would make a new robe for him and take it to him at the temple.

So what do you think of that? What sort of mother would willingly give up her son when he was little more than a toddler, to go and live in the temple? Was Hannah cruel or uncaring?

But living in the temple, Samuel learned about God, and learned to know God, and grew up to be a great prophet of God ... and eventually to be the leader of his people. It was Samuel who anointed Saul to be the first King of Israel, and David to be their greatest King ... and when Samuel died as an old man, the whole nation of Israel gathered to mourn him.

Perhaps Hannah wasn't such a bad mother after all. She trusted Samuel to God who could care for him even more than she could. She committed him to God's service ... to grow up to know God, to be a man of God, and to do the work of God.

By being willing to let go, Hannah allowed Samuel to grow up to be what God called him to be ... a great prophet, and a leader of Israel ... the man that they needed at that time. Her sacrifice was for Samuel's greater good, and for the benefit of all God's people.

Isn't that the real job of parents?

... to do all that we can to enable our children to become what God intended them to be?

Mothers and fathers alike have a responsibility to teach our children the faith, to nurture them within the family of the Church, and to work and pray for them in such a way that they grow up to be faithful servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. This not only pleases God ... it is setting them up for the best that life offers.

This is something which involves all of us, as the people of God. Some of us are godparents, and have taken on that special responsibility to pray for our godchildren and to help them to grow up with faith in Jesus ... but whenever we have a Baptism, the whole congregation promise to support the parents – so none of us are off the hook!

It is not about bullying our children into a narrow-minded religiosity and denying them the freedom of the life they might otherwise choose. On the contrary, it is doing the very best for our children ... since there is no better place to be than within the will of God.

This matters more than wealth ... more than fame ... more than status ... more, even, dare I say it, than the great modern gods of Fulfilment and Happiness – because being right with God is what will shape their eternal destiny.

So .. perhaps Mothering Sunday gives mothers *and* fathers the opportunity to consider what our priorities as parents ought to be ... and to resolve to help our sons and daughters to discover God's will for their lives ... even if that means learning to let go, and trust our children into the care of the God who loves them even better than we can.

Our other reading was from John chapter 19.                      So ... what sort of Son was Jesus?

Jesus can't have been the easiest son for Mary to raise ... especially considering the things she had been told about him. Mary had the memory of the archangel Gabriel's message at the very beginning, about what Jesus would become ... and the words of Simeon the prophet in the Temple, about the sorrows she would have to endure.

Then when Jesus was going about preaching and teaching and healing, and the Pharisees and the Priests were all out to get him, she must often have feared for his safety. When she was worried for him, and mothers often are for their sons, there can't have been much comfort in what Simeon had said all those years before ... "*a sword will pierce your soul*".

I wonder if Mary remembered those words there at Golgotha, as her son hung in agony on the cross. Jesus looked down and saw his mother among the other women standing nearby ... and also standing there was John, the disciple who was Jesus' closest friend.

Both Mary and John were overwhelmed with grief, but Jesus' thoughts were for them ... and especially for his mother:

*"Dear woman, here is your son"* he said ... and to John *"Here is your mother."*

Even at his worst moment of fear and pain, Jesus was concerned for her welfare.

The Scriptures teach us to honour our fathers and mothers ... and the command is unconditional. It doesn't say 'honour your father and mother if they deserve it.'

I know there will be people here today who have not been parented well ... perhaps even some who have suffered at the hands of their parents ... and for some it is hard – maybe even impossible - to honour your father or your mother. I recognise that you need God's special grace to overcome that pain.

But this isn't the issue for most of us. Most of us have parents who have done their best, and done a reasonable job.

Maybe you need to be able to forgive your mother or father for not being perfect ... maybe you need to forgive yourself for not being the son or daughter you might have been ... but on the whole, we can be thankful for the love our Mothers and Fathers have given us, and for the example they have been to us.

So ... perhaps Mothering Sunday gives us the opportunity to say 'Thank You'.

It's a nice occasion, Mothering Sunday. Parents like to see the children taking part. Children enjoy giving flowers to their mums ... it's good to come to Church and sing "Now thank we all our God". But it needs to be more than that.

It needs to be a time to consider the God-given responsibilities of mothers (and fathers) and pray for God's help. It needs to be a time to honour our parents as God commands.

Above all, it needs to be a time to thank God for his mother-love, expressed to us not only in family life, but most especially in the gift of Jesus Christ, his one and only Son.