

**A Sermon preached by the Dean of Windsor,
the Rt Reverend Dr Christopher Cocksworth,
on Mothering Sunday, Fourth Sunday of Lent, 10th March 2024**

***The Readings:
Exodus 2. 1-10 & Luke 2.33-38***

In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Mothers and Mothering Sunday

The fourth Sunday of Lent traditionally looks to Mary, the mother of Jesus and her part in the life of her son and his coming passion: how the suffering of her son touched her in profound and personal ways.

For that reason in England this Sunday has become also the day when our hearts and minds turn to our mothers as we give thanks for their love and care.

Mothering Sunday can be a strange day for some. For men it can be an odd sort of day. We are not mothers and though we may have been close to mothers, we have no direct experience of conceiving and giving birth.

For those, perhaps like Anna whom we heard about in the gospel reading who seems to have lived alone for decades after the death of her young husband, some women may have been deprived of being a mother through the circumstances of life.

Some women – and there is a long tradition of Christian women here – have chosen not to bear children because there have been other things they wanted to bring to birth.

Some women – the younger ones gathered here today – will face the momentous decision of whether they enter into the responsibility of motherhood.

Some like the mother of Moses protecting her child from the death threats of Pharaoh may have been forced through the tyranny of oppression – economic, social, criminal or whatever – to give up their children to other mothers.

Some, like Mary, mother of Jesus, will have had to suffer a sword piercing their own soul as they have borne the unbearable and seen the child to whom they gave life, die before them.

For some, men and women, today will stir the grief of the loss of their own mothers, knowing that the one who gave them breath has breathed their last.

The mother of Moses and the mother of the Lord

Whatever this day brings to our mind, what is there to learn from the mother of Moses and the mother of Jesus about not only being a mother but about mothering itself? And what may we learn from them about God who gave birth to the world?

For these two women to give birth meant also to give away. Pharaoh, fearful of the Israelites resident in Egypt, ordered all new born male babies. Moses' mother knew the only way she could save her son's life was by hiding him in the bulrushes of the Nile; and then to allow him to be adopted by – in the providential irony of God – Pharaoh's kindly daughter.

What the angel had announced to Mary before the conception, of Jesus, Simeon confirmed when Mary and Joseph brought the babe to the Temple – his life would be caught up in events that

she could not control and from which she could not protect him but would bring salvation to the world God created.

Every mother knows, or soon discovers, that they give birth not to hold that child in their arms for ever but, in due time, to release their child into fulness of their human potential, to flourish in their own personhood, to face the challenges of adulthood, finding their unique role in the world, to bring good, pray God, to others.

We also learn from these two mothers that mothering is shared and that it is more than biological birth-giving. Pharaoh's daughter and her servant play their life-giving part in the mothering of Moses. Joseph, father and husband, Simeon and Anna in our reading each have their roles in mothering the life of Jesus – forming his identity, shaping his vocation, loving him into fullness of life. Mothering is a way of being to which we are all called in some form.

Mothering and purposes of God

And we learn from these two stories that mothering belongs to the purposes of God.

God is the God of life. God loves life to come into being. God calls mothers to join in God's good purposes of bringing life and God calls – if I may put it like this – 'others than mothers' to take their share of the nurturing of life. 'It takes a whole village to raise a child', as the African proverb says.

God, as Pharaoh's daughter and Simeon and Anna remind us, is the God of redemption, who sees the life of the world going wrong and sets about putting it right. God's purposes of redeeming life, resetting life, so that human beings can flourish

and the earth thrive, need nurturing with the fierce love of a mother. God's plans of overcoming all that stands in the way of God's life-giving love – all the evils of the all the Pharaohs of the world – need to be fought for with the protective instinct of a mother.

What are the purposes of God for the flourishing of the life of others that you and I have been entrusted with that need our mothering?

They may be the life and health of a child, grandchild or godchild. They may be the needs of a husband, wife, relative or friend in older age or troubled times.

They may be a project, an initiative a piece of work, a composition, a career that needs your attention and your determination to bring it to fruition so that it can benefit others. They may be a charity or school facing challenges that needs our time, skills and money.

For the Lord Lieutenants gathered here today who do so much good up and down the land, it may be the many events you attend, the good causes you support, the people you recognise: these are ways by which your mothering, your caring, your self-giving for the good of others nurtures and nourishes, encourages and liberates the people of your counties and the well-being of your communities.

Mary, the Cross and God

Let us return to Mary and to the haunting prophecy of Simeon that cast a long shadow over her mothering of Jesus: 'This child . . . is a sign that will be opposed . . . and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

And opposed he was (and is): hung upon a cross, derided by those who had acclaimed him, despised by those who had hounded him, deserted by those who had followed him – apart, that is, from his mother, some other women and the unnamed disciple.

Recently I wrote a book about Mary. You can find it in the gift shop.

It was enriching getting to know better the figure of whom we read in the Bible. There was one occasion, though, during the depths of a sleepless night, wrestling with many thoughts, when I found myself not only intensely moved by the historical experiences of Mary but also drawn very close to her as a present reality in the life of faith as the human mother of the Lord who takes us very near to the divine mystery of the cross.

It was as I sensed something of the depth of grief of this woman who gave to birth to this man now writhing on the cross that I glimpsed something deeper about the agony of the Father who, as St Paul says, '*gave up* his son for us all' (Romans 8.32).

'O my son, would that I were tormented instead of you!
O would that your wounds were upon me!
O that I might take death upon me instead of you'.

Words of Mary imagined by a man, Maximus the Confessor in the 7th Century, but what mother has not said the same when they have seen their child suffer?

Words that call to mind the cry of King David when he heard of the death of Absalom his son.

'O my son, Absalom, O Absalom my son, my son'.

Words that will be sung on Good Friday in churches across the world.

Words that take us to the heart of the Christian gospel – that ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life’ (John 3.16).

Let us, as Holy Week and Easter approach, be not those who oppose the child of Mary and all that God has given birth to in the world through him.

Let us, rather, with Mary, *believe* and say with this dear woman, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word’.