



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Mothering Sunday

readings: [Exodus 2.1-10](#), [2 Corinthians 1.3-7](#), [Luke 2.33-35](#)

March 27th 2022

Mothering Sunday takes us to the heart of the question – who is God and how does God work in the world which God created and continues to create?

We understand more than we might have done in past years that many find Mothering Sunday a difficult day. Emails arrive inviting us to declare whether we would prefer not to receive messages about connected retail offers. Yet our readings require us to think seriously about motherhood and its part in our human experience.

In our Old Testament reading from the book of Exodus God is not mentioned by name, but its about God's work through human beings, and especially women. A caring princess, a resourceful and courageous sister, a mother who was both brave and worldly-wise. And behind the text brave midwives who refused to obey Pharaoh's order to kill all the male children of Israelite women in Egypt immediately as they were born. Women who were prepared to take risks and a rescued child who grows up to be the leader of a nation.

And its with children that my reflections begin this morning. Until recently I thought that my own children's adult lives would be framed and impacted by the 2008 banking crash and its aftermath which continues in the remarkable work of foodbanks helping to relieve poverty amongst the third of our children in UK who grow up in poor households. A decade later, I then thought that our children's lives would be shaped mostly by Brexit and all its implications for both our country's internal and external relationships.

I now think that we have to add the defining moment of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the coming into being of a new world order. Yesterday at Derby Diocesan Synod we reflected on the story of Moses drawn out of the water. Alongside this image another is now imprinted on our minds: the theatre in the port of Mariupol where families were seeking shelter from the Russian attack. Standing in isolation in a large enclosure. At either end of the theatre the word children written on the ground in huge letters, to be seen from the air. To no avail and children and their parents and their grandparents needlessly slaughtered by the bombing.

It's well into the 21st century and have we made no progress from the reign of terror of the pharaoh of ancient Egypt who actively killed male children? We are seeing evil perpetrated on the children and young people of today's world on scale that we can hardly believe. The invasion is 'an act of great evil'. Increasingly I feel we must pray not only for a cessation of violence, hostilities, and destruction of human lives of all ages, but also for an end to oppression and for genuine freedom and peace for Ukraine and all peoples.

Paul's words at the beginning of his second letter to the Corinthian church are downbeat. They feel as though they are born of darkness and pain. Such a contrast with his language in his first letter to the Corinthians where despite dealing with all the problems of the young church at Corinth, he could be upbeat, optimistic, hopeful, full of energy, looking to the future with joy. Something happens between the writing of the two letters. Some think that he writes imprisoned at Ephesus, but nobody quite knows the full story. Second Corinthians spirals around, repeats itself and only gradually unfolds into hope.

Paul seems to be saying that just as God consoles him in his affliction, so he is being equipped to console others in their affliction. Paul's life as an apostle imitates God's life: he shares deeply in the sufferings of Christ. The church as it suffers shares in the cross of Christ, all for the purpose of serving God's purposes in the world. What Paul grasps deeply is that suffering is given meaning in the life of Christ and therefore in his own life and the lives of those to whom he writes.

'Blessed be the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ' he writes: even in the agony he is able to step back from his own affliction and enter into the praise of God. The Corinthians are to patiently endure the same sufferings that he endures: this is patience for a purpose, not lashing out in revenge, or anger or pain, but stepping back and allowing God to work. All because the end is to be hope: not resentment or the gloom of melancholy, or self-persecution over his failings or vilifying the shortcomings of others.

God is profoundly at work in the struggle and pain of the early church focused in Paul's apostleship – praise, patience and hope are the hallmarks of God working. And wherever we see these lived out in the life our communities so we see God at work around us, in the midst of pain and struggle. It is nothing less than the shape of motherhood revealed in God's work in the world!

And then we come to St Luke's Gospel and Simeon speaking of a sword that is to pierce Mary's soul. This is the pain that Mary will endure as she surrenders her Son to the purposes of God. It begins to happen when Jesus as a twelve year old finds his place in the Temple speaking with the teachers of Israel, and is lost from his family for three days; it happens when the family have to surrender him and let him go; it happens when his home town of Nazareth surrenders him, and on an even bigger scale as the people of Israel who sang his praises on his entry to Jerusalem in their fickleness let him go on the way to death by crucifixion.

The sword is the pain of giving up and surrendering: it's that pain that Moses' mother felt as she put her child into the reeds at the riverside and offered him to the mercy of the Egyptian court, albeit another woman; it's the pain that Paul felt in that prison at Ephesus when he had done so much and was now out of control of his own life. It's the pain that we all feel at our helplessness in the face of the 10 million Ukrainians who have had to flee their homes, not to mention those who have lost their lives. Above all, it's the pain of God our Father who gave up his only Son to the mercy of human wickedness and self-centredness.

And this is where we find God at work in God's world. In the pain of surrender, in the midst of affliction, in the world's agony and our apparent refusal to learn from the past. God knows what it is to feel helpless and subject to the forces of affliction in this world. God knows what it is to experience the surrender that Mary came to feel.

God knows the pain of motherhood which is why we can speak of God as our Motherly Father.

Those of us who are following the *Living in Love and Faith* Course on sexuality and identity talked extensively about gender two weeks ago. If we hadn't realised before, we certainly came to an understanding in our discussion of how complex the question of gender is and inevitably the answers to difficult questions were open ended. God is beyond gender even though we often rely on our limited way of describing male and female as we search to describe the indescribable God.

Our God is the God who has from eternity an only-begotten Son. The imagery is one of birth and from a mother's experience. Elsewhere in St Luke's Gospel Jesus speaks of gathering the people of God under his wings like a hen gathers her chicks around her, offering a home, a place of security and safety, and of the pain of not being able to do so because of the rebellion of Israel against her prophets.

Many in the Christian tradition have got there before us. Julian of Norwich the English mystic of the fourteenth century spoke of 'the God who rejoices that he is our Father, and the God rejoices that he is our Mother.' Even before Julian, Anselm the great theologian of the eleventh century spoke devotionally of Christ our mother. God our mother is there in the scriptures even though perhaps in a male-centred world our ability to hear the resonances has been dulled.

God not only is our Motherly Father but our Fatherly Mother. It's the only way we can make sense of our experience of the God who is present amidst the sufferings of this world, because that is where we find God at work – in the bravery of resistance, in the courage of responding to bereavement, of the fortitude of those who have had to escape with their children and move to another part of the world without any certainty about the future.

As we continue our journey through Lent and move from Mothering Sunday to passion Sunday next week, it's only a suffering God who can save us and draw us out of human sinfulness into the hope of a new kingdom of peace and love and justice – the kingdom of God. This is the truth we draw out from our readings today and which we take with us into passion Sunday, the Sunday named after the sufferings of Christ, when we prepare ourselves for the final part of the journey from Palm Sunday to the fatefulness of Maundy Thursday, the agony of Good Friday and hope of Easter Day.

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