

Mary Sumner Day | 9 August 2026 | 10:45 Eucharist

Part of the reason I am here today is that I am the diocesan president of Mothers Union, here in Derby and today marks our 150th Anniversary, with August the 9th being recognised as 'Mary Sumner Day' around the world and observed by the Church of England.

I have started this sermon so many times over the last few weeks, I've been going round and round and asking God, in fact begging God, to give me a hand with what the message is, here for us today.

And then I think it came to me, with a little help from a friend.

But before we start, a bit of congregation participation:-

Those of you in the congregation who **aren't** Mothers Union members what do you think of when I say Mothers Union? Knitting, Cake? Jam and Jerusalem-No that's the women's Institute

Maybe some of you might be picturing a family member from the past who faithfully attended Mothers Union, probably a woman, devoted to God. Maybe they did the flower arranging or made refreshments at church.

You might be picturing a dusty Mothers Union banner in the Lady chapel of your church

When I think of Mothers Union I think of an organisation that is alive and kicking. I think of faith, friendship, opportunity and the loving embrace of Jesus which is given to all, unconditionally.

Mary Sumner was born in 1828, but MU came about when Marys eldest daughter gave birth and Mary was reminded what a challenge motherhood can be for some people.

She was married to a priest and so knew Jesus very well and would have had quite a comfortable existence. Like the disciples, she was used to knowing the presence of Jesus and she knew that she could call on Him when she was in need.

She knew that all were loved by Jesus and recognised that whilst she might have been in a privileged position, not all women in those days were quite so lucky.

There was obviously a bit of a storm brewing inside of Mary Sumner because she decided that she needed to do something,

which in those days would have been quite radical really because not many women were public speakers,

she called together Mothers' of all social classes (again, quite out of the ordinary in the 1870's) to talk about faith, life and bringing up their children in the love of Christ.

Mary Sumner was so nervous at that first meeting that she had to ask her husband to speak for her.

Before the **next** meeting of the emerging Mothers' Union, a bit like how we heard Jesus speaking to Peter in our Gospel reading, I am pretty sure Our Lord said to Mary

'Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid'

And Mary Sumner did take heart. She took the step out of the boat, got out of her comfort zone and walked towards Jesus. At the next meeting of the Mothers' Union, Mary Sumner had built up enough courage to speak to the women present.

Once upon a time, I was also very nervous and would never have spoken in front of a congregation like this but through Mothers' Union and the support and training I was given 16 years ago I went on to form a support group that helped parents of children with additional needs all over Derbyshire. This helped me get back into work once the children started school and eventually, I ended up working for Mothers' Union in Westminster and am now the Director of Derby Multifaith Centre.

Mothers' Union has helped me grow in confidence, supported me in my training to become a Reader and earlier this year I spoke in front of 800 people at the MU annual gathering.

The world in 1876, the year that MU was founded, was different from what it is today and so was MU but sadly there are still many similarities between now and then. Mary Sumner also spoke up about the injustice faced by unmarried mothers at the time and she took in her unmarried niece and great nephew.

This love for those on the edge of society and a need to fight injustice is something that MU still acts upon today. Whilst we have had lots of different waves to ride out, 150 years later, we are still here.

One of the MU's first campaigns was to raise the age of marriage from 12 – 16 years of age, but we have changed to ensure we remain relevant. In 2010 our Bye Buy Childhood campaign worked to prevent the commercialisation and sexualisation of children.

In the UK we became fully inclusive to **all** of God's children over 50 years ago and have remained so ever since.

Like Mary Sumner we are not afraid to speak up or act outside of social norms and to do what we believe is right. We have campaigned against HIV and Aids in our work overseas.

We work in a huge number of prisons in the UK, showing prisoners the love of Christ. We support families, whatever they look like.

We speak out about domestic abuse, we fight tirelessly against modern slavery with our members here in Derbyshire helping identify and support victims to escape.

Families might look very different today to what they did in 1876, but Mary Sumner knew that faith is the foundation of family life. She wanted each household to be filled with the light and love of Jesus. When Mary Sumner started Mothers' Union, she put her trust in Jesus and stepped out of the boat to do something out of the ordinary that would make a difference to millions of people around the world.

And on the subject of stepping out of the boat, back to the Gospel!

The disciples are there having a nice old sail upon the sea of Galilee when a storm starts to brew.

I'm sure many of you have seen the image of God reaching His hand out to Adam on the Sistine Chapel, in pictures online, at leastif not in person.

Gods finger is fully extended towards Adam, but Adams finger just seems to be holding back that little bit. God is there but Adam has to reach out to touch Him.

In our Gospel, the disciples were there on the boat, thinking they were alone when Jesus started to come towards them walking on the water. Although Jesus hadn't been visibly with them, neither had He left them in their hour of need, but Jesus invited Peter to step out of his comfort zone and to reach out and take His hand.

Even after Jesus telling Peter 'It is I, do not be afraid' Peter still didn't trust Him 100% and wanted Him to ask him again... 'come'

Jesus asked Peter to trust Him, to put his faith in Him when Peter started to sink. Sometimes in life we can feel a bit 'sinky' like the love of Jesus is so far away from us. But of course, Jesus was there to greet Paul, to pull one of his children into his loving embrace.

Just as Jesus was there with Paul and as He was there for Mary Sumner, as He has been there for every one of His children throughout history and as He will be there for all His children throughout eternity, Jesus is there for us.

How many times does the Lord have to ask us to come to Him, especially when we are nervous and worried about taking that first step?

He is reaching out His hand, we just have to extend our fingers that little bit more like Adam in the Sistine chapel to take His hand and have Him calm our storms.

What is it in your life right now, where Jesus is asking you to put your trust in Him?

Maybe its to join Mothers' Union? Who knows, but what I do know is that whatever part of your life it is, where you need to step out of your comfort zone, the love of Our Lord Jesus Christ will be there to hold your hand and still your stormy seas.

Canon Emily Brailsford