

Mothering Sunday (14th March 2021) during Coronavirus & 'Lockdown 3' from Fr. Mike.

Collect

God of compassion, whose Son Jesus Christ, the child of Mary, shared the life of a home in Nazareth, and on the cross drew the whole human family to himself: strengthen us in our daily living that in joy and sorrow we may know the power of your presence to bind together and heal; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

- **1 Samuel 1. 20-28**
- **Psalm 34. 11-20**
- **The Holy Gospel of Luke**

'And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him. And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against: (Yea, a sword shall pierce through your own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.' (Luke 2.33-35)

Background

Historically, Mothering Sunday falls at the 'half-way' point in our season of Lent, and offers an opportunity for reflection, devotion and refreshment.

Traditionally, the Lent fast was broken on this 'Laetere Sunday' so that people returned to their 'mother' church. 'Mothering' also referred to the Mother Church in Jerusalem. But nowhere did it mean biological mothers.

The Industrial Revolution led to people increasingly working and living a significant distance from home and family, and the Refreshment Sunday tradition was kept by many as a day to return to worship in their home community. And in the 19th century, those who were working in domestic service, who would be working through Easter, were permitted to return to their own communities on Mothering Sunday. More sympathetic employers sometimes allowed them to bake and take with them a 'Simnel Cake' as a gift for the servant's own mother and family. So, it is only recently (in the last 40yrs or so) that

Mothering Sunday morphed into 'Mother's Day,' largely helped by the greeting card industry, and focused almost entirely on one's own mother.

Mothering Sunday 2021

Well, you may remember this time last year was when the first 'Covid-19 lockdown' was abruptly enforced, as both Church and State swiftly declared a national (and global) emergency in response to the deadly and highly infectious Coronavirus. Unfortunately, literally a year later, the crisis remains and indeed persists on this Mothering Sunday.

After the initial fear and shock, clever scientists across the planet have developed a number of vaccines to help us tentatively resume our preferred activities. However, the phrase 'normal life' can no longer apply to any of us; although the phrase 'adapt and overcome' seems to be our new collective leitmotif in every aspect of life.

Perhaps it would be wise to consider the appointed psalm for this day (psalms being the 'prayer book' used by no less than Jesus himself) - reminding us, as it reminded him, that **'The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry... and delivereth them out of all their troubles.'** (v.15, 17)

These frightening moments of pandemic will pass. We believe that in God's time we shall emerge with renewed strength and Hope. The frustrating and unanswerable question of course is both when, and how?

Many have lost their Mother. Whether this is through injury, disease, estrangement, current restrictions regarding visiting or simply the passing of a life from this world to the next, the practical and emotional result is the same – catharsis.

Since the outbreak of Coronavirus, businesses have collapsed, employment is no longer guaranteed, predictability is shaken and there are all manner of little practical and emotional 'deaths' to navigate.

But for all who this day remain bruised and battered by bereavement, parting, or any other form of death; there is timeless consolation close at hand, apparent once again by turning to the psalmist, who speaks with equal potency to us as he did to Christ, by pointing out **'The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.'** (v.18)

How do we react to all this now?

Well, there are as many responses to the current pandemic situation as there are people! No two persons seem to follow the same path. Some of you, for instance, may recognise yourself in the Old Testament scripture for today:

'But Hannah went not up, for she said unto her husband, I will not go up until the child be weaned, and then I will bring him, that he may appear before the Lord, and there abide for ever.' (v.22)

Some do not feel comfortable coming to public worship. There are those who for a variety of reasons have simply pulled up their emotional and spiritual drawbridge completely until the current crisis passes. They wait for all to be vaccinated, and cautiously venture out only to the shop or supermarket. Some are in the 'vulnerable' category and have little choice in order to stay safe. Others rely upon relatives, friends, helpful neighbours in their 'bubble' or 'click and collect' options from supermarkets for practical nourishment.

There are those who follow each new government guideline from Public Health England to the letter, whilst others continue to behave as if none of it applies to them! Consequently, you might think that human nature has changed little since the Babylonian exile in 550BC.

The story of Samuel introduces him as a child of **prayer**. His birth was foretold by an angel to his mother; Samuel was asked of God, by his mother. Both together intimate what wonders are produced by the Word and prayer. Samuel's mother was Hannah, the principal person concerned in the story of this chapter.

Here is her 'affliction'—she was childless, and this affliction was aggravated by her rival's insolence, but in some measure balanced by her husband's kindness (*read the whole chapter for the detail*).

The prayer and vow she made to God under this affliction (in which Eli the high priest at first censured her but afterwards encouraged her) resulted in the birth and nursing of Samuel. Hannah presented her treasured son to the Lord. Why is this significant in 2021?

(1) Whatever we give to God, it is what we have first asked and received from him. All our gifts to him were in effect, first his gifts to us.

(2) Whatever we give to God may upon this account be said to be **lent** to him, that though we may not recall it as a thing lent, yet God will certainly repay it with interest, to our unspeakable advantage, particularly what is given to his poor.

When by baptism we dedicate our children to God, let us remember that they were his before by a sovereign right, yet they remain ours ever more deeply as a result to our eternal comfort. Hannah resigns her precious child Samuel to the Lord, not for a certain term of years like children are sent to be apprentices, but for '**as long as he liveth, he shall be lent unto the Lord**' (v.28) - for *life*.

Likewise, our Christian covenant with God must be - a marriage-covenant; so that as long as we have life, we must be his, and never forsake him by taking the less demanding route.

Lastly, the child Samuel did his part *beyond what could have been expected* from one of his years; **'He worshipped the Lord there'**, in other words **he said his prayers**. He was no doubt extraordinarily forward (we have known children that have discovered some sense of religion very young) and his mother, designing him for the sanctuary, took particular care to train him up to fulfil his destined work in the sanctuary. Noteworthy for us then, that little children should learn to worship God. Their parents should instruct them in his worship, bringing them to it, engaging 'mother church' as best they can. God will always respond to these sincere efforts with gracious acceptance, teaching them to do better as the months and years progress. All adult Christians are today equally encouraged to follow Samuel's example by saying their prayers and moreover, putting themselves out to do so (ideally 'in the temple') at every opportunity – as this requires a degree of sacrificial commitment.

Health warning!

Remember that each time the sons of God come to present themselves before the Lord, Satan will be sure to come among them sowing perversion and frustration. (Job.1.6) But do not be alarmed, as this is always part of our journey, particularly during Lent.

On this particular 'mothering' Sunday we will bless and present a small symbolic gift for each person in church. This year it will be a pouch containing five sugared almonds. Why? They are traditionally part of a 'simnel cake' and represent the five wounds Christ endured for us on the Cross (to His hands, feet, and side). You may choose to keep the gift (which is perfectly fine) and as you consume, reflect upon the fact that Jesus died for you so that you might enjoy life in all its fullness; alternatively, you might decide to offer it to someone else in your family or community who would appreciate a gesture of love and comfort?

The pouch containing the gift is white, to represent the purity sought by all who in humility try to grow in holiness by following the example of Christ and His mother.

Conclusions

Striving to grow in holiness, as a household of faith we are regularly offered and fed ('refreshed') by the blessed sacrament; nourished therefore by the very bread of eternal life! This integral foretaste of the heavenly banquet awaiting all who grow in grace through Christ is God's sacred gift to us - ever more potent in these troubled times. A unique and vital spiritual antidote then, healing the difficulties we all face during coronavirus pandemic, **but** despite the wonders of zoom technology, this timeless sacramental gift **cannot be accessed remotely**. Therefore, we are encouraged (like Samuel) whether we be male or female, to regularly '**come before the Lord**' responding to each new challenge thereafter like 'mother church' does, and a biological mother might – i.e. **sacrificially**. To protect and nurture like this, '**in joy and sorrow,**' risks having our souls **pierced** (like Mary) in the process, yet we can always trust in the healing rewards contained in His body.

So, at this point in our shared history (or indeed our individual lived experience) it would be foolish and ungrateful to adopt a cavalier approach to these heavenly opportunities offered to us all in love, unconditionally. Each one of us then, is challenged to search our heart, and ask: '**am I truly holding my neighbour, and therefore Christ, in the palm of my hand?**' The answer will determine whether our current attitude to prayer and worship has integrity.



Fr.Mike, Mothering Sunday 2021