

Reading for Mothering Sunday 2021, John 19.25b-27, Colossians 3.12-17, Psalm 127

Smack in the middle of Lent the Church of England observes Mothering Sunday, which has some affinity to Mother's Day. Today is also called Refreshment Sunday or Laetare Sunday. Laetare is a Latin word meaning Rejoice! The Latin name points to its pre-Reformation origins in the undivided church of western Europe, which we may also refer to as the Latin church to which we as Anglicans despite many a protestation unmistakably belong.

How did this Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Lent, acquire its Latin name Laetare? Laetare is a reference to the opening antiphon assigned to that day and is taken from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah,

Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,
all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy,
all you who mourn over her—
that you may nurse and be satisfied
from her consoling breast;
that you may drink deeply with delight
from her glorious bosom. (Is. 66.10)

Today is a moment in Lent to let up briefly from the rigours of this Christian season. It is a day to remind ourselves that we are putting ourselves through the rigours of Lent for a reason, namely our present and our future are secure in God, while knowing that we are called to a better daily living. Underlying our Lenten discipline there is thankfulness and rejoicing. Today as we let go a little, as we rest in God and in what God has accomplished for us and for all of creation, the God who gives direction to our lives, we rejoice and give thanks.

On Mothering Sunday in England today children honour their mothers with flowers, cards, handcrafted gifts, possibly even making breakfast and helping their mothers in the house wanting to make them feel special. Reversing the roles of parent and child for a day. Children become prime carers for a day. Mothering Sunday will have many funny sides to it. Boiled eggs that aren't boiled or boiled so hard they may not exactly be a treat, but Mother must put on a brave face.

I must acknowledge that not everyone has enjoyed the love and protection of a mother or parents. In our congregation there was an elderly woman now deceased who never knew her mother. She was adopted. On Mothering Sunday she was unable to share in the joy of the day, as she was reminded of her sadness. Mothers age. Get sick. They too have their issues. Roles are reversed as mothers age. This day for children and parents can bring back painful memories and remind others of present challenges.

Yes, that is one side of the coin and for honesty's sake it must be acknowledged even today. We cannot shunt it on to a side track. There is another side. One that my brother first articulated out loud on becoming a parent when his world was turned upside down by the arrival first of Martin then Veronica as the family moved from England back to Canada Rozzi. He would have said something like, "Now I have an idea of how much it cost our parents to be our parents. I am in their debt. How did they do it?" I hear this sentiment expressed time and time again often in baptism conversations with young couples who have become parents. Young parents become admirers of their own parents. They become aware of the sacrifices their mothers made for them. Possibly you notice that I am treading carefully. More and more men from what I observe and know, even from my own family, are involved in the nurturing of their children. The spouse who stays home taking on a role that previously was more clearly framed.

I have spoken briefly about the framing of this Sunday in England as Mothering Sunday and the influence of Mother's Day on it. Let us now turn to the Gospel set for today, before touching on the reading from the letter to the Colossians. The Gospel fits well with today. And possibly looking at it from a distance we can better appreciate what is happening here. We can adjust our focus slightly not focusing on the horror, but the gift in the horror. It is Good Friday. Jesus is nailed to the cross. At the foot of the cross stand Mary and John. Jesus sees them. What does he do? He gives them to one another. He says to John, "Here is your mother" and to Mary "Woman, here is your son." (John 19:26-27) He is giving them to one another. He is binding them. It is a sign and it is one of intimate relationship. We can't know for certain, but there is a post-biblical narrative that sees John and Mary fleeing Jerusalem to go live in Ephesus. As some of you will know, beyond the ruins of that once magnificent city of Antiquity to the south there is a small mountain. On the top there is a house called Mary's house, where it is alleged that Mary and John lived. They are given to one another.

Okay, that happened. Now what about us? What does this have to do with us? Remember the question asked of Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum? “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” A question that we might be asking ourselves? A question we should be asking ourselves. Well, actually quite a lot. It may sound extraordinary, but we are given to one another. One of the images used of the Church is that of a family. One family in Christ. The Church is sometimes referred to as mother. The language of brothers and sisters is also used. When we are baptised we become members of one Body. We are set in relationship to one another. We are dependent on one another. We are given to one another. We are to nurture one another.

We need to withstand the turbulence that will arise from time to time, but not break the bonds of fellowship for they cannot be broken. At a human level of course they can be broken, but not in God. We are members of one another in God. Sometimes we will feel the pain deeply. Our measure is Christ, who invites us into a new way. My ways are not your ways.

I am reading a science fiction novel intriguingly entitled ‘The Book of New Strange Things’. You might ask what the title of the book ‘The Book of New Strange Things’ refers to. The book is the Bible, which tells the strange ways of God amongst creation. My ways are not your ways. It shows another way. As Christians we come to believe it is a better way. We are made, created through God’s work to live it in community and in fellowship by baptism God’s work with us.

Our second reading admonishes the Christians in Colossae to put on, to cloak themselves, in five virtues. These are spelt out. They are compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience underlined by love. These the Colossians are urged to put on. These we are being urged to put on today. They are to shape are us. They contrast with impatience, pride, hate, bitterness, and contempt. A way of being a Christian is by seeking to emulate Christ, who is the exemplar of the Christian life par excellence and seeing Jesus as the one “in whom God was pleased to dwell”. When I hear compassion I think of God, who is long-suffering, who time after time relents. When I hear patience I think of how God is patient with his people and patient with us. When I think of humility I think of how God in Jesus took up his home in our flesh and dwelt amongst us. When I think of meekness I think of the letter to the Philippians. “And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” When I think of kindness I think of

Jesus who did not revile in turn. We must be looking to the cross or to put it differently we as family must remain clustered around Jesus at the foot of the cross. In the first letter of Peter we read, "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly." He did not say an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. This is heavy stuff. This is the Way of Strange New Things. Can we walk it?

People in relationship. People following the example of Christ. People baptised into the Body of Christ. People given to one another and there is much they have to endure, undergo, withstand together as they live with differences but united by God's grace, wills being informed and changed by God's revelation of self, while being molded by Jesus' example.

Today is Mothering Sunday. The Church is a place of Geborgenheit, of shelter, but it is also a place of belonging. It is a place in which divine love shows the way in the person of Jesus Christ. Hopefully mothers and parents and all of us are being molded by examples of sacrificial love perfectly modelled by Jesus Christ. Hopefully we are being molded by the sacrifice made once for all. It was the disciples who forsook Jesus and not Jesus the disciples.

Living towards his last heartbeat, his death on the cross, Christ continues to minister by putting people into relationship with each other foreshadowing thereby what the reconciling work of God accomplishes. God in Jesus makes, creates people to be one in relationship to one another in a new way of being, acting and doing. He unites people across the divides of yesterday, today and tomorrow. Indeed this is the fullest way of life on offer and it is a strange new thing.

Let me end with words spoken to a people in exile, "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland." (Isaiah 43:19) Yes Lord, we believe, help our unbelief!