

The Fourth Sunday of Lent (Mothering Sunday)

St Thomas, Salisbury, 2023

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9

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

There was an article in the *Church Times* on Friday (a periodical, by the way, that my theological college principal famously reminded us that it was a duty to read and a sin to enjoy), there was an article on Friday that noted that although traditionally Trinity Sunday was the day of the year on which clergy most dreaded being asked to preach, Mothering Sunday runs a close second. And actually in the same edition of the *Church Times* there was an article pondering whether, given the way that the conversation about sex, gender, and the nuclear family has moved on in the past few years, Mothering Sunday might actually have run its course as a useful and edifying occasion.

I'm not going to preach on that. I will note, however, that as you have no doubt heard preached many times before, the origins of this distinctly English tradition of keeping the Fourth Sunday of Lent as Mothering Sunday are murky and manifold. There is the tradition that today is a particular day of thanksgiving for human mothers - the secular Mothers' Day. And many of us no doubt chime with that, though of course there are many here who have lost their mothers, there may be those too whose relationships with their earthly mother, or mothers, is complex or painful.

There is a tradition that today is really about going to your cathedral, to your mother church. Those of you who want to lean

into that interpretation could take a stroll and the High Street after the Eucharist and light a candle or say a prayer in the mother church of our diocese.

There is the tradition that today is a day of particular focus on our Lady, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God. And those who chose the hymns for today clearly want us to note that theme. And that is a good thing to do as well. Our Lady speaks to us of so much of faithfulness, humility, obedience, and the lived experience of dealing with pain, that forms a pattern not only for human mothers, but for all of us. And then of course there is Refreshment Sunday - but for that we would need the pink vestments that for some reason we choose not to adopt, but the lightening of the sense of penitence on this middle Sunday of Lent does allow flowers back into our church, hence the posies that will appear at the end of the service!

Those who choose the readings for today chose not the readings for Mothering Sunday, but those for the Fourth Sunday of Lent. And I'm glad about that. Every third year we get these big extraordinary Scripture passages leading up to Easter. Last week we heard about the Samaritan woman and the living water, next week we will get that astonishing story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. And today, the man born blind. These readings are chosen quite deliberately by the church, they've been used for a long time, because they are forming in us an understanding of the nature of the Christian. The nature of the Christian family. In which we are each other's mother and father, sister and brother.

Last week we learned that the church, the family of God, has the capacity to drink from streams of living water. Today we learn that we have the capacity to see. To see clearly. This language is of course metaphorical. Amongst the gifts that we receive as the

family of God as we grow slowly more and more into the image of God, is that we begin to see more clearly.

St Paul, in our second reading this morning, is saying exactly this when he said, “once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light.” And elsewhere in Scripture of course Our Lord himself talks about the eye, doesn’t he, says if your eye is full of darkness, our whole body becomes dark.

The Christian family is to be full of light. Because the Christian, through their baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ, is full of light. That is what happens at the font. We plunge down with Christ into the dark, and we rise with Christ into the light. That gift is stamped on us from the beginning. And the work is to remember and live to that. And when that memory grows dim, to recognise that that is because of us, not God, and ask for help. We all need each other for that. Because we are a family. As I’ve probably preached before, the natural unit of Christianity is the congregation, not the Christian. So for certain on this Mothering Sunday we must remember we need each other. And if you find that you are struggling with the darkness, that it’s less easy than it was to feel your baptism this Lent, pick up the ‘phone to one of the clergy. Send us an email. Come along to one of the Lent activities. We are here for each other.

The Rector said last week that, and I quote, “we are not people of the lower conversation, we are people of the higher conversation”, and that means that we are people who *know* that there is gushing water welling up for eternal life. Well, today’s gospel builds on that. We are people of the higher conversation, conversation about God, and identity, and hope, and grace, and that means that we also know that there is light. And we are to be people who not only cultivate our own lives so that we are receptive to the light, but also cultivate our own lives so that that light can shine from us too. To be people of the higher

conversation means that we are people who have something distinct to say, and one of those things that we want to distinctly say is that once we were in darkness, and now in the Lord we are light.

Our readings today offer us a couple of warnings about the ease of misinterpreting that message. Samuel assumes that the Lord’s anointed is going to be the big, muscular, tall, eldest son of Jesse. But it isn’t. It’s the youngest, David. It behoves us not to overlay onto to kingdom of God worldly assumptions about value. This is an inclusive church, so we’re on the right road, but nonetheless we need to check ourselves regularly about that.

Secondly, we need to not get in the way. The wonderful, epic gospel reading is full of people getting in the way of the simple truth that Christ has brought light into the blind man’s life. The disciples say, ‘who’s fault is it that this guy is blind’, and Jesus says, well, no, it’s not really like that. Then once he is cured, the neighbours, the Pharisees, the big group of people who John rather unhelpfully simply terms ‘the Jews’, all sorts of people keep saying, is it really you? Do you really think Jesus should have done this on the sabbath? You’re lying to us, so we are going to go and ask your parents. Do you really think you should let a sinner like Jesus minister to you?

And the man who had been blind just keep saying, ‘I don’t know about any of that: all I know is that I was blind, and now I can see.’ The miracle gets crowded out by a whole bunch of people who want to qualify it, or to discredit either the recipient of the miracle, or the giver of the miracle. Grace, Amazing Grace, gets pushed out of the way by a desire to be in control, or to regulate, or to discredit. Or just to be heard loudest and last. And that is something that we do. We do it as individuals, we do it as a church, we do it as a society, and yes, sometimes we do it as a family. And we need to go of that, and let God be God. As the

man who had once been blind says, “here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.”

And that is pretty much exactly what we say at our baptism, or at our confirmation. Or every time we open our hands to receive bread from heaven at the Eucharist. I do not know where this comes from, but I know that it opens my eyes.

We are the family of people, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, of each other and of Christ, who have received light. We worship here this morning blessed by the example of St Mary the Virgin, mother of God, patterning for us a life of obedience even in pain, in the shadow of our mother church the Cathedral, to which we can all repair for solace, prayer and inspiration; and bearing into this holy place joys and sorrows, the triumphs and disasters of our own earthly relationships, mothers included.

And we simply stretch out our hands again at the altar to receive light. And nourished, we recommit ourselves to be people of the big conversation, to resist the temptation to control, or gatekeep, or dominate with our own agenda, but just to point gently towards the light. “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes.”

Amen.