

## Lent 4 (Mothering Sunday)

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, in the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 31 March 2019

*Readings: Exodus 2 vv 1-10 and Luke 2 vv 33-35*

In the days of the strict observance of the Lenten fast, which I guess few of us keep these days, Mothering Sunday was a welcome break from the harshness of the fast, with a slightly relaxed diet. It was something to look forward to, and set people up for the increasing rigours of the second part of Lent, with Passiontide and Holy Week to come.

Mothering Sunday has now become an important day in the greetings card and flowers industry and in the hospitality and, increasingly, travel industries. Sometimes the advertising is a little thoughtless. In the last week, I have received a number of email advertisements, inviting me to take my mother on a special outing or for a meal. Since my mother died some years ago, I can laugh these thoughtless advertisements away. But the reaction for those in the midst of bereavement could be very different.

Mothering Sunday can also be a very difficult day for some women – those who have lost children and those who have never known the bittersweet joys of motherhood.

Even Mothering Sunday services can be rather cosy and unrealistic, because mothers everywhere know the true story – that motherhood is no bed of roses. The Bible is entirely realistic in this regard: we meet motherhood in the raw in such stories as Hannah's vow to give her longed for son Samuel to serve God in the Temple; or the agony which Simeon foretold for Mary and which came to pass as Mary watched Jesus die on the cross.

In our first reading today, from the Old Testament book Exodus, we hear the difficult decision of Moses' mother as she sought to protect him – using a degree of deception in the process when she hid him in the rushes. However high the walls, literal or metaphorical, dividing communities or individuals, sometimes, common humanity breaks down those walls, and everything changes. The story of Moses' birth and childhood is packed with irony and humour. Like parenthood, in fact.

The discovery of Moses in the basket hidden in the reeds was a pure accident. He had been removed from his home because of the Pharaoh's decree that infant Hebrew children should be killed, in a focussed genocide that has been, sadly, the precursor of many others, when a particular community becomes the focus of hatred and suspicion. So Moses' mother hides him – as it happens, in plain sight. The basket which was supposed to conceal Moses from the Egyptians is found by none other than the daughter of Pharaoh. Real Egyptian meets real Hebrew in a human encounter which ignores all the posturing and rhetoric. Both are changed for ever as a result of this meeting.

Pharaoh's daughter would not ordinarily have encountered one of the oppressed Hebrews. She lived in splendour and comfort in the palace, perhaps absorbing the common chatter about the wretched Hebrews. But unexpectedly, the cry of the oppressed reaches her ears. The two worlds meet. And the response is compassion. She realises that she cannot, for all her wealth, provide the care that this baby requires and gladly welcomes the offer from the Hebrews that they care for one of their own. Pharaoh's daughter does not simply walk away, but embraces her new responsibilities. Moses' mother is paid to look after her own son: is this the first recorded case of family allowance?

There is so much of the story we do not know. What was the reaction when she returned to the palace from the riverbank? 'You did ... what?'

As ever in parenthood, what is done can never be undone. The stillborn child is loved and remembered as much as the one who grows to adulthood. When there is estrangement, the pain is almost unbearable.

And to see a child die before its parent seems to be an affront against nature. There is no sorrow like a mother's sorrow at the death of her child. Simeon warned Mary of the consequences of being the mother of the Son of God when Jesus was brought to the Temple in his infancy. The short gospel reading today records that encounter. Soon, we will hear again the Passion gospel and watch with Mary as Jesus is crucified.

But, like each one of us, Mary will know not just the pain of losing her precious son, but the joy of resurrection.