

Chapel of St Peter and St Paul, ORNC

11.00am Choral Eucharist

Mothering Sunday/ Fourth Sunday of Lent [19 March 2023]

readings: Exodus 2. 1-10; 2 Corinthians 1. 3-7; John 19. 25b-27 [RSV]

The Bible is full of families that don't quite function the way that they're supposed to. To start with, no sooner have Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden and started a family of their own than Cain does away with his younger brother Abel in a fit of jealous rage (Gen 4). Then there is Abraham, who comes within a hair's breadth of slaughtering his own beloved son Isaac in order to prove his obedience to God (Gen 22). Isaac in turn later fathers the twin sons Esau and Jacob, who can barely stand the sight of each other, while Jacob in due course is tricked by his father-in-law Laban into marrying not the woman he loves but her sister instead (Gen 27-9). And so it goes on and on: there is scarcely a narrative in the Old Testament that does not in some way undermine the concept of the conventional family in which everyone more or less gets along. Rather, here parents turn out to be unreliable, siblings turn on each other, and husbands and wives are routinely betrayed. That this is the case shows us clearly, whether we want to see it or not, that the story of salvation – the story of how God acts in the world – has never conformed to our own cherished ideals about domestic and social order. And this is an especially awkward truth to have to confront on this day of all days, a day we set aside to honour the mothers in our midst, and in doing so, to celebrate the many ways in which the notion of motherhood itself binds us all together. It is as if God, through scripture, insists our celebration should be more than a mere affirmation of sentiment and instead serve as a moment to deepen our understanding of what motherhood is really all about, even if it comes in forms that do not readily fit into our established categories.

The story of Moses in Exodus 2 is a good case in point. Knowing the proclamation from Pharaoh that all Hebrew males are to be killed at birth, Moses' mother takes huge risks with his life in order that she might save it. His rescue by Pharaoh's daughter, happily followed by a return to his own mother to be nursed and reared – all this, on the face of it, would appear to be the perfect outcome. In what must surely be a God-given plan, Moses enjoys both the nurture of the slave-woman who has brought him to birth, as well as the privilege of growing up as the son of a princess. The only problem is that Moses, in the process, grows up to be neither entirely a Hebrew nor an Egyptian. As a man with two mothers, then, he must find a way to reconcile a divided self. And it turns out that the only way he can do this is by answering God's call not just to pity his people from afar, but rather to become the very instrument of their liberation. This can hardly have been the way either of Moses' mothers imagined things would turn out for him on that day so long ago, when he was discovered in a basket among the reeds.

The relationship Jesus has with his mother in the Gospels proves to be no less complicated and equally crucial to the man he later becomes. Even if we set aside all the upheaval and anxiety surrounding Jesus' birth, it quickly becomes obvious that he will never be an easy son to have. Thus, when his parents present Jesus as an infant in the Temple, Simeon not only identifies him as the messiah but then warns Mary that being his mother means 'a sword will pierce through your own soul, too' (Lk 2.35). As if to confirm the point, even as a boy Jesus proves ready to discount family responsibility, such as when he disappears in Jerusalem and only after much searching do his frantic parents find him in the precincts of the Temple. 'Son, why have you treated us like this?' asks his mother, only to receive the cryptic reply: 'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' (Lk 2.48-9). And then once he's become an adult, Jesus articulates explicitly his vision of the family as something that transcends biological relationship. Thus at one point, while he's addressing a crowd and is informed that his mother and brothers are waiting to speak to him, he responds by asking rhetorically: 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And he points to his disciples and says, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother' (Matt 12.48-50). Having received such treatment

at the hands of her firstborn son, Mary must have remembered all too well the words of Simeon and felt the perplexity and heartbreak that came with being mother to a man like this.

It's against this wider backdrop that we're invited to try to make some sense of what Jesus says in our Gospel reading today. For clearly in giving his mother over to the Beloved Disciple and the Disciple in turn over to his mother, Jesus is gesturing towards something more profound than mere practicalities (John 19.25-7). After all, and as he has demonstrated again and again throughout his life, domestic arrangements have never been very high on Jesus' list of concerns. So what does this assertion of mutual adoption signify? At one level, of course, Jesus appears to have made constant demands upon his mother's love and loyalty while rarely seeming to give her very much in return. But here at last, in his dying moments on the Cross, we see him offer to Mary the very essence and consequence of all that he has lived for. In inviting her to become mother to the very closest of his followers, he gives her not just consolation but purpose. He recognizes that through a lifetime of painful confusion and dogged faithfulness, she has emerged not just as his mother, but as a possible mother to all who would follow in his name.

On this Mothering Sunday, then, I think we're invited to approach motherhood as something transcending the bond that we have with the women who gave us birth. Not, I should emphasise, to the detriment of that bond, because surely for some of us that bond is the most important connection that we have in the course of human life. Yet in following Jesus, it seems to me that Christians must be ready to conceive of motherhood as something still larger, a model for all those relationships we have with those prepared to give of themselves that we might live. Because all mothers, and indeed all fathers and other carers, eventually come to terms with the fact that those we love and nurture will outgrow us. And like Moses, and of course like Jesus himself, they may well become someone or something that we never even considered was possible. Yet that is both the heartbreak and the privilege that Mary knew so well, and for which we, in our own way and in our own hearts, give all due honour and gratitude to those whom we love and know by the name of mother.