

Lent 4 John 3:14-21

Traditionally Lent 4 was known as Refreshment or Mothering Sunday although we must be clear that it is different from Mother's Day. Mother's Day can be a very difficult occasion for many reasons as it excludes lots of people. It excludes those who are not mothers and those whose mothers have died. It can also exclude very painfully those who have bad experiences of motherhood whether in their relationship with their mother or in their role as mother. And of course mother's day completely excludes all men! In Australia these two occasions, Mothering Sunday and Mother's Day are celebrated on 2 entirely different dates so that makes it easier in many ways.

Mothering Sunday is an inclusive festival rather than one that excludes. Perhaps we should revert to calling Lent 4 Refreshment Sunday or simply Lent 4 because there is very little in the readings set on today's lectionary, that encouraged preaching about mothers yet they all included some reference to mothering.

None of our readings spoke of Mary, Jesus' mother invoking feelings of guilt at our failure to live up to her perfect example of parenthood. Nowhere was there a mention of childbirth which is something most mothers simply have to discuss with one another at some time or another. We hear nothing of Moses, given up by his natural mother in order to save his life and adopted by a loving mother. There is no reading from the book of Ruth about the mothering of Naomi, her mother-in-law which is perhaps the best description of mother/daughter relations to be found in scripture.

Instead this morning we heard from the book of Numbers, a typically wordy bit of Paul's letter to the Ephesians and some thoughts on judgement by Jesus one would need a crowbar to make this stuff fit into mother's day. But of course that's the point. In a lectionary where we have the lovely stories of great biblical mothers we as preachers wouldn't be able to help but fall into the trap of preaching mother's day. We would talk about their wonderful examples and maternal skills thereby excluding all men within the first paragraph and many women by the end. Yet to preach mothering is to look for attributes that can come from anyone.

Look at Moses in the reading from numbers, he is dealing with the unruly Israelites and as they sin, bad things happen. They blame God for the bad things (not themselves of course) but God for punishing them and they try to make it up to God and then pray that the bad thing, the snakes, are taken away. God, however, answers their prayers in a very different way, he uses Moses to find a way to heal the snake bites with his staff but doesn't take the snakes away.

Now contrast this with a bunch of unruly children, telling them how they should behave, what not to do because they will hurt themselves, but letting them play anyway with the warnings to guide them knowing without a doubt that at least some of those children will falter and fall, that injuries will happen but that not only can we adults not stop them but we shouldn't stop them. The only way to remove risk completely is to control entirely the child, and by controlling the child we limit that child's ability to grow and develop into strong, mature, independent adults.

Contrast this with any human relationship, a friendship for example. We can often see our friends making poor choices, behaving in ways that are likely to cause them pain and suffering, yet we have to take care in sharing our fears in case we alienate our friend completely and then who will they have if it all goes wrong as we suspect it

might. So we gently talk, we offer advice but when they ignore our advice we continue to love and care for them, reminding ourselves that they have to make their own choices and being a friend is not about control but respect.

We each and every one of us faces situations all times which impact on others. What we say, what we do, how we behave. These choices are as much a part of mothering as caring for a child, the attributes of mothering exist in all our human relationships and encounters. Whether its parking our car in a way that allows others to use the space next to us in the supermarket, or if we hold a door open after us rather than let it shut in someone else's face. Whether we spend our money on fair-trade products or get the cheapest alternative. These are little things, I know, hardly worthy to be compared with bringing up a child yet they all stem from the same thing – our response to other people.

Mothering is not smothering or doing everything for someone else – it is in fact enabling people to do for themselves sometimes just as our children are not always babies they also become teenagers and later adults. Mothering should not be a patronising thing whereby we treat people as though they can't do things for themselves. Rather, mothering is about caring for others as a mother cares for her child. To truly preach mothering Sunday we need to emphasise that the mother is a metaphor used to describe an attribute of God and an attribute that we should be striving for in ourselves.

Jesus said, God so loves the world that he gave his only son, that everyone who has faith in him may not perish, but have eternal life. Many of us will have experienced that feeling of an everlasting love from our mothers, it may be where our knowledge of such a thing originates before we come to understand God's love and if we're lucky the love of a spouse or even a friend that lives up to that ideal.

As our lives progressed we have looked to others and ourselves to provide for our various needs but the example came from the primary carer, for most but not all of us, that will be our mother. Even when our relationships with our mothers are not perfect they are still central to our understanding of the world and it is no surprise that the Church chooses to celebrate mothering attributes, the bible is full of them and like all things it comes from God, love, caring, responsibility – all gifts of God all bound up in God's nature.

And just like our day-to-day experience teaches us that mothering is difficult, mothering children and modelling mothering attributes towards others, God understands those difficulties. We are shown through scripture that God wants us to express our love for him through our love for one another. He has given us as a metaphor the example of the mothering relationship to draw on in our dealings with our neighbours. To love them, to care for them and to take responsibility for them just as a mother does for her children is what God asks of us all, male and female, parents and children, friends and enemies. Whatever our relationship with our neighbour to truly follow the command, love thy neighbour, we can do no better than to model our response on that of a loving mother.