

## **Sermon for Sunday 10 March 2024 – Mothering Sunday (The Fourth Sunday of Lent)**

**Revd Canon Simon Pitcher, Rector**

***Exodus 2.1-10; Psalm 34.11-20; 2 Corinthians 1.3-7; John 19.25-27***

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

So today is Mothering Sunday, and our Bible readings help us to think about the mothering love of God for his people. And we had a number of stories about the mothering love of God in our readings just now.

The first reading concerns the story of Moses. Can anyone remember what mother was called? Anyone remember? Special Easter egg for anyone who can remember. I have to turn to Graham for the answer. You don't know Moses's mother's name? No. Moses's mother's name was Jochebed. Have we got any Jochebeds in this morning? No? Okay.

Well, she gave birth to her child at a very difficult time. Pharaoh was very worried about the number of Hebrews who were being born and growing up in Egypt, and he thought that they would overrun the country. So he decided to have all the Hebrew baby boys who were born killed, which is a horrible story and reminds us of the potential violence of human beings. And Jochebed, in a desperate attempt to save her baby, has to let her baby go, and she places him in a basket where we get the name Moses baskets from. And she places him in the reeds on the river Nile and hopes that somehow he will be saved. And of course, the magic of the story is that Pharaoh's daughter finds the baby and takes him into Pharaoh's own palace and there raises the child as her own.

So the work of God through human agency; and of course, Moses grows up to be the one who's going to lead his people from slavery to freedom in the promised land; but Moses doesn't quite believe all the promises of God on the journey to the promised land, so Moses doesn't enter the promised land; he has to die before the people get there.

So that story kind of introduces us to the story of Christ Jesus, because, of course, he's God's only son. Jochebed's son didn't have to die, but God's son did, and in doing that, was obedient to God all the way through to enable him to lead his people to salvation in Christ Jesus. So our third reading that Graham just read for us was about the story of Jesus on the cross and where he accomplishes our salvation in the outstretched mothering arms of God that we see on the cross. And if we look up at our big east window up there, we have the image of our third reading in glass up there. I heard it described as the best piece of stained glass in Suffolk, that window, up there, which is quite a claim, but it is a fine piece of glass. And what we have up there is Jesus on the cross with his mother Mary on one side and the disciple John on the other. And we hear for ourselves the words of Jesus at that moment, 'Woman, here is your son'; and to John he says, 'here is your mother'.

Now, for many centuries, that same scene would have been presented to us in a life sized sculpture on top of the screen here. This is the rood screen, and the word rood is an Anglo-Saxon word, ROOD, Anglo-Saxon word for cross. And, until the reformation, that same scene was here for us, filling the chancel arch. And we may feel, but it's a good job it's not there. It's a bit gruesome, but actually I feel really sorry that that image isn't there for us, because when we come in, we see that scene, and we hear those words, 'Woman, here is your son; man, here is your mother'.

And what does that do for us if we make that our own, in our own imaginations? Well, it makes the gateway here, the entrance to the eucharistic table. And we go forward together and gather around at the table in the Lord's name; and we receive, don't we, his bread, his flesh that feeds us, his wine that sustains us, his blood. And we are made into one family, aren't we? We are, in his name, recreated into one family. So here is your mother, here is your sister, here is your brother, here is your father; one new family in the mothering love of God. 'How long have I longed to gather you under my wings for shelter, and you were not willing? But if you are willing, if you come to his table, then you're made one and you are his.' So I like the image of the rood because it makes us his own, it makes us one family on this Mothering Sunday. We think about that.

And if we were to go back in time, not that long ago, maybe a generation, our bible reading today would have been from the old prayer book, from St Paul's letter to the Galatians, and I think I'm right in saying that this is where the idea of Mothering Sunday comes from, because the passage for the fourth Sunday in Lent, that was read on this Sunday since the time of Henry VI until about sort of 40 years ago, was the phrase 'Jerusalem, which is above, is free and is your mother'. So that letter to the Galatians reminded everybody who read it throughout the centuries that the church is your mother. Not the institution of the church, I don't think, but the fellowship of the church, us together, receive the mothering love of God and share it with each other to create a new family.

So what St Paul was writing about was that he, too, saw how religious traditions can all be about rules and regulations. Rules and regulations and traditions can bind you, and you're not free. You have to obey the rules, don't stand on the lines or the bears will get you. But St. Paul is saying, in the love of Jesus, the only thing that matters is that you accept the love of Jesus for yourself. It doesn't matter what the haircut looks like; it doesn't matter what clothes you wear; it doesn't matter if you stand up or sit down in the wrong place or if you all say 'Amen' in the right place; none of that matters. The only thing that matters is your relationship with Christ Jesus.

And that sets us free. Sets us free. And because we're free, we discover in our freedom together as members of the church, the mothering love of Christ Jesus. So I think that's what we're celebrating today. In the past, many people would go home from wherever they were to the place where they grew up. They'd go back to their own mothers and to their own families and come to church on Mothering Sunday and rejoice in all that they shared together in their growing up, all that they'd learned about God together, their fellowship, their faith, their family, their belonging. So maybe today we can do the same thing, to rejoice together and to celebrate that we are a new family, one family made new, in the freedom and the love of Christ Jesus. Amen.