

A Reflection from Revd Ali for Mothering Sunday ~ The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Mothering Sunday is always celebrated in churches on the fourth Sunday in Lent. Traditionally, it is a day when we thank God for the love of our mothers or those who have mothered us. Usually we would try to thank them in person for their care. But this year, like so many celebrations, Mothering Sunday will be a little different for all of us.

The service itself dates back hundreds of years. Once a year, on Laetare Sunday, people were encouraged to return to their 'home' or 'mother church'. In Latin, the first words of the prayer for this Sunday were 'Laetare, O Jerusalem' ('Rejoice, O Jerusalem') taken from Isaiah 66.10. The prayer spoke of the love for Jerusalem, the original 'mother church'.

This special Sunday half-way through Lent is *not* the same as the Mother's Day which is celebrated in springtime in other countries. It isn't a day just for mums, it is a day to remember that we are all part of God's family and a day to give thanks for Mother Church. It is a Sunday break from work, a chance to rest and be restored. Our traditions of posies and simnel cake stem from a time when young people were taken into service in 'the big house' or found work in factories in the large urban towns. This day was a gift of a holy-day to return 'home'. Many of those young people would have picked spring flowers as they walked. If they were lucky, and were in service in a generous household, the cook might have baked them Simnel cake, a rich fruit cake with marzipan that would have lasted until Easter.

Our modern celebration of Mothering Sunday has been influenced by other cultures' Mothers' Day. In America, Mother's Day began during the Civil War amongst mothers who had lost their children and as a means of bringing peace to a broken country. It has now become a day to spoil mums, if you are lucky enough to have had a good mum; or if you are blessed to have had children. But it can also be a painful day for many people whose relationship with their mother's was not good, whose mother has died, or for those who have longed to, but not have been able to have children. We commend all those who find this day painful to the mercy and love of God.

Our Mothering Sunday Bible passages were stories about strong women. Very appropriate for this week which began with International Women's Day. Our Old Testament reading was a story which features a birth mum, an adoptive mum, a big sister, and a nanny (who it turns out is also the birth mum). Our Gospel reading is about one of the strongest women in the Bible, Mary mother of Jesus. Our readings are about strong women whose actions changed the world.

Our first reading was set in Egypt at the time of the Pharaohs. In the backlash to the story of Joseph and the flourishing of his family and tribe in Egypt, the Israelites had become feared by the Egyptians and forced into slavery. Pyramids were being built and there was much call for hard labour. The working conditions for the Israelites become more and more unbearable. But instead of diminishing the Israelites, their community continued to grow. Pharaoh became fearful that the huge number of Israelites in Egypt would destabilise the country. Fearful that there might be an uprising against him, he orders a cull of all male Hebrew children. A despicable and evil decision that goes against all our understanding of humanity.

Into this time of fear and oppression a child was born. An ordinary child. Neither he, nor his parents are named. We only know that they were of the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe. Our first strong woman is his birth mother. At first, fearful for his safety, she tries to hide him from the Pharaoh's edict. But as he grows she realised how impossible the task had become so she came up with a plan. She created the first 'Moses basket'. She wove the basket, coating the papyrus with bitumen to make it waterproof. She laid her beloved son in the basket and hid it in the reeds on the bank of the river. Our second strong woman is her daughter. The mother, unable to watch over her son, stations her daughter to guard him.

Standing at a distance, the big sister watched and waited and saw the Pharaoh's own daughter come to bathe in the river with all her attendants. She was our third strong woman. Pharaoh's daughter saw the basket and sent her maid to fetch it. She opened the basket and discovered the crying baby. She knew that the abandoned child must have been a Hebrew infant. Her father's decree means that she should have drowned the child. But, instead she took pity on the child. She defied her father and adopted the child as her own son. Giving him the protection that, as a Hebrew boy, he would never have.

The big sister appeared at that moment of courageous decision and she offered to find a Hebrew woman, an Israelite, to nurse the child. Surely the Pharaoh's daughter must have known what was happening. But she agreed and appointed the child's own mother as his nanny. The mother's employment not only saving her son but the income from the Pharaoh's daughter would also have provided for the rest of her family.

Pharaoh's daughter's maid saw what happened. She understood the dynamics of the encounter, but she too is a strong woman and kept the secret of the child. The actions of those strong women, saw Moses brought up in an Egyptian household but hearing the voices and stories of his Israelite heritage.

Moses is one of the great Patriarchs in the history of God's people but the names of those strong women are not recorded. If we were to remove all the strong women in the Bible, the nameless and the named, the story of the history of the people of God would be very different.

Then we come to one of the strongest women in the Bible, Mary, Mother of Jesus. Mary's whose strength of character enabled her to say yes to God when she was little more than a child. Mary who was strong enough to trust in God's plan for her life, to bear the child who would change the world. Mary who was strong enough to travel 90 odd miles whilst heavily pregnant and who gave birth in less than ideal circumstances. Mary who was strong enough to welcome the strange natal visitors from the extremes of the social spectrum, the shepherds and the Magi. Mary who kept her precious Son safe as the family fled persecution as refugees while Jesus was still an infant. Mary who nurtured her Son to manhood despite warnings from the prophet Simeon about the pain that would one day pierce her heart. Mary who was distraught at losing her Son after a visit to the temple. Mary who saw her beloved eldest Son arrested, abused and tortured. Mary who was strong enough to stand at the foot of the cross as he was dying.

Her love for Jesus and her faithfulness to God's call on her life gave her strength to support him until the end. Jesus understood the price that Mary had paid for her devotion to him. In one of his last and most poignant acts on earth, he commends her care to the beloved disciple, John. Jesus, by this act, gave her a future, a protector and someone to comfort her after his death.

So, today we give thanks for all the mums and all the mothers, we give thanks for all the strong women in our lives, and we give thanks to God for once again being able to gather here, in our mother church.

Amen