

Mothering Sunday 2021 - Created Family

So today is Mothering Sunday...and I'm pretty sure most of y'all will remember this particular Sunday last year, because it was a very different kind of service. Tim and I had set up our own little television studio in Hardingham church with cables running all over the place and lots of debate over camera placement and microphone range. For the first time ever we were trying to figure out how to broadcast "church" because for the first time ever our collective worship in a church building was scattered into individual homes, and our weekly gathering as a church family was being done virtually in individual families and households. And it was all very strange and slightly uncomfortable, and we all hoped it would only last a few weeks. But here we are, a year later, and it's astonishing how much we've learned and adapted to: my dining room is pretty much a permanent chapel, and we only have to walk to the desk and turn on the computer to gather for Morning Prayer, and all of us now automatically do that awkward little wave that signals the end of a Zoom meeting. It's not what we really want...we'd much rather be together and see each other's smiles without a face mask in the way...we'd much rather hear all of our voices joined together in singing and we'll even put up with a cold and uncomfortable seat in a pew for the opportunity to join together at communion. But it's the best we can do for now, and, unlike last year, this year we're seeing an end in sight, and we're looking forward to being together again for the great celebration of Easter.

And when I was reflecting on this past year and on today's readings and on Mothering Sunday, I noticed a common thread running through all of it: the idea of new connections and created family. Now that doesn't seem all that obvious at first, because in the past century, the 16th century idea of Mothering Sunday has merged with the much later American tradition of Mother's Day, but the observance of Mother's Day in America...which is actually in May...is often a bit too restrictive and a bit too exclusive. It's true that these days the definition of motherhood has become a bit broader, and people will choose to honour anyone who has stepped in to the role of mother in their lives...which could mean a grandmother or a sibling or even a single father. But it's still focused on an exclusive and privileged relationship. The human archetype of a mother is someone who cares for us and nurtures us, someone with whom we have one of the closest bonds we will ever have. And when that expectation is not met or not possible for whatever reason, it can cause the deepest hurt we can know.

But let's think for a minute about the original idea of Mothering Sunday and about today's readings. A few centuries ago, this Sunday was a bit of a break from the rigours of Lent. The term "mothering" didn't refer to familial ties but to the mother church, because this was a Sunday when people would make a pilgrimage. Servants would be given the day off to travel back to their home churches, and folks who lived near a cathedral or minster would travel there for the Sunday service. It was a Sunday to go out of your way to join in a different kind of gathering. And then there's

our readings: both are about motherhood, but both break the traditional ties of biological family and create new connections and families.

First, there's the familiar narrative of the birth of Moses. His birth mother fears for his life and decides the best thing for him is to break his connection with his Jewish family, and in the end she takes on the role of nursemaid to him while Pharaoh's daughter becomes his adoptive mother. Not at all a simple relationship for a mother. And then we have our Gospel reading where we find ourselves standing with Jesus' mother Mary at the foot of the cross. But notice, when he sees her standing there, he doesn't call her "mother." In the Greek he calls her gunai which is a fairly impersonal way of addressing her...simply "woman." Which seems a pretty hurtful way to talk to his own mother. But he goes on to tell her that from now on John is her son, and to tell John that Mary is now his mother. He breaks the former traditional relationship but only in order to build a new family within the very first group that would form his Church.

And I think the really intriguing thing about this encounter at the cross, is that this is the second time in John's Gospel account that Jesus refers to his mother as gunai, woman. The first you might remember is at the beginning of his ministry at the wedding in Cana. Mary asks him to intervene when the wine runs out, and what she is doing in a sense is calling in a favour. She is relying on her special relationship with him as his mother to influence him. But his response at first is to break that relationship...he doesn't respond to her as her son, and he makes it clear

that he is not treating her as privileged because she is his mother. Seems a bit harsh. But notice, he does what she asks anyway. This comes full circle when she ends up at the cross, and he finally refers to her as a mother again, but as a mother in a new family. Because she has to get to that point, she has to be standing at the foot of the cross to truly understand what relationships are to God. Because what Jesus demonstrates to us is that in God's kingdom there are no special or privileged relationships. All of us are equally loved and equally privileged. None of us can claim a special relationship with God to the exclusion of others. This is why we cannot claim to love God if we hate our sister or brother.

In our gathering together as a Church, we acknowledge the family that God has formed. No matter what our existing relationships are: whether we come from a close-knit family, or we have adopted our own family of friends, whether we are on our own, or we're in the middle of a big and complicated network of in-laws and step-parents...whatever the case may be, when we gather together as God's Church, we simply bring ourselves as individuals who are unique and cherished and irreplaceable. And all that is asked of us is that we see each other in that light. That everyone God brings our way is our mother and brother and daughter. And that we will always be open to new connections, new ways of gathering, new ways of being family. Because that is what God offers to us in the cross of Jesus Christ...the offer of forgiveness and a new start. However we choose to be family in our human relationships, this Mothering Sunday let's give thanks to God for the ways we have been supported and encouraged, for

the forgiveness we've received and the second chances we've been offered. And let's resolve to do the same for others as we start this new week.