



The Chaplaincy of Aquitaine

La Paroisse Anglicane d'Aquitaine

Chaplain: Rev'd Tony Lomas

SERMON FOR MOTHERING SUNDAY 22ND MARCH 2020

As I was preparing my sermon this week, I did wonder whether it was really still meaningful to celebrate Mothering Sunday in the current circumstances. This is, after all, a day when the focus is on relationship; it might therefore seem difficult at a time of enforced separation and isolation.

However, it then struck me that, in many ways, our relationships are able to transcend the ravages of this virus. Particularly in a classic parent/child context, separation does nothing to break the bond of love, indeed, as they say, "absence can even make the heart grow fonder".

From my own point of view, my relationship with my mother has, thus far at least, survived the fact that I have decided to go and live in a foreign country and, whilst we might not see each other quite as frequently, we probably speak to each other on the phone more frequently than we did when I only lived a few miles away.

If we look at the readings that are set for today's celebrations we see that they certainly do not give a warm and woolly picture of motherhood. There are two alternative OT readings suggested which, although we haven't heard them read today, are probably both familiar stories. The first from Exodus (*Ex 2:1-10*) is the story of Moses in the bulrushes. The alternative is from the first Book of Samuel (*1 Sam 1:20-28*) and tells of Samuel's birth and how, despite her longing for a child, his mother Hannah abides by her promise to God and dedicates the boy to God's work, giving him to be brought up living in the Temple with the priest, Eli.

So here we have two different accounts of mothers willingly separating themselves from their children. In both cases they act in a way that must have been entirely contrary to their own motherly instincts because they believe that is the best course of action for the future of their sons.

And in our short Gospel reading we hear the words of Simeon when the baby Jesus was presented in the Temple. But this isn't the nice bit, the bit we know as the *Nunc Dimittis*. This is the bit that must have sent shivers through Mary's heart "*.. a sword will pierce your own heart as well*". (*Luke 2:35*)

On one level, this is an experience that is probably common to almost every parent. In any loving relationship there is the potential for hurt and as children I am sure that we have all caused sleepless nights for our parent by various things that we have, or perhaps have not done. Even Mary's excruciating pain at witnessing the cruel death of her son is sadly not something that is entirely unique to her.

Overall, therefore, these readings seem to focus strongly on the downside of motherhood – on the pain and anguish that can be part of that relationship. So actually, at a time when many, if not all, of us are feeling confused, anxious and alone, perhaps this is a very relevant way of marking the day.

But – and this is a pretty big but! – I can't believe that God wants us to be confused, anxious or alone.

Jesus frequently told his followers not to worry and not to be afraid and his final words in St Matthew's gospel are "*I am with you always, even to the end of the age*". (Matt 28:20) Jesus truly is Emmanuel – God with us – not just in the good times but especially in the bad, especially when we feel most isolated.

And so our reading from St Paul's second letter to the Corinthians does take on a particular importance in today's context.

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, ..." (2 Cor 1:3-4a)

Perhaps the primary source of God's comfort is through the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives – in some versions of the Bible the word 'Comforter' to translate the Greek word 'Paraclete' in John 14 when Jesus promises the coming of the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit, we can all feel comforted by the knowledge that God loves us infinitely and unceasingly but sometimes, just knowing that doesn't seem to be enough. Paul, however, covers that base as well – because he goes on to say:

".. so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." (2 Cor 3:4b)

Over the last week my e-mail inbox has been buzzing with copies of mail that many of you are sending to each other, keeping in touch and, above all, sharing positive, encouraging – might I say – comforting messages that you think might help. Whilst we do need to be careful not to get to a point where we're all flooded with excess information, this is, to my mind, an example of a Christian church doing what a Christian church ought to do – caring for others.



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I have always wondered about those people who denigrate faith as just being an emotional crutch. If I had broken my leg, I don't think that anyone who criticise me for using a crutch so what are we supposed to do if we are suffering from a broken spirit? Is there really anything wrong with finding support and comfort where you can?

Last week I wrote about Hope, that inner assurance of a blessed future. But, as I have seen many messages saying this week, being a Christian doesn't mean that there won't be tough times, it just offers us the strength to make it through to the other side. I believe that we should, at all times, endeavour to live lives that are marked by this strength and hope, for our own benefit but also, and in many ways more importantly, as a way of demonstrating to others that there is a better way of living.

Does Christ's light shine brightly from us? Especially at times like these, can we be marked out as people who care more about comforting others than about being comforted ourselves? Or perhaps I should say, are we people who have such inner comfort that we have plenty to share with others?

Mothering Sunday reminds us of this sort of self-giving love and comfort that many of us have been fortunate enough to receive from our mothers but this year in particular, it also reminds us that that love comes at a cost. Even though we are unable to gather around the Communion table today, we always have the ultimate example of that costly love in the passion and death of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

I would like to finish with words from St Paul again; at the very end of our New Testament reading:

".. our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort." (2 Cor 1:7)

Stay safe! Stay Hopeful!

God bless you all!

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