

Mothering Sunday 2022, 1 Samuel 1.20-28 and Luke 2.33-35

So many things have changed over the last few years and with it how we perceive the world, ourselves and how we live out and profess our faith. Everything is somewhat or a lot out of place. Think of one of those detective movies, where someone coming back into a room detects that something is not quite right. A picture on the wall is not quite straight. A glass is not where one left it. A blind is drawn that had been left up. We may be thinking at this point, If only. If only it was just a drawn curtain confronting us. Something has shifted or has it? I begin with this thought because the change that has taken place means we have a less carefree approach to our keeping of Mothering Sunday, although there is still joy with its origins in the antiphons and readings set for Latin Mass that can be traced back to the 8th century.

Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,
all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy,
all you who mourn over her—
that you may nurse and be satisfied
from her consoling breast;
that you may drink deeply with delight
from her glorious bosom.

That is a powerful image that all of us like a child should suck on the breasts of Jerusalem as if she were our mother there to console us. Jerusalem like a mother will nourish us that we may grow into maturity. The Epistle set for the pre-Reformation Mass was from Galatians in which Paul refers to the story of Hagar and Sarah, the mothers of the children of Abraham, speaking of 'Jerusalem ... which is the mother of us all.'

Let the above suffice in providing some historical background to the keeping of this day. What we are to take away is that we need to be nourished, that we can be nourished and that we are being nourished by God in the midst of tribulation. This day, Mothering Sunday, was firmly rooted originally in the church. It like so much has taken on a life of its own. It has been cut loose from its Christian moorings. In England it is still known mostly as Mothering Sunday reminding us as children of God that the Church, a community rooted in Christ, is there to mother us into full maturity that, as this Lenten season calls to mind, we might better withstand the

temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. This *withstanding* can be described in some words from a favourite English hymn written by the American Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.

The two readings we heard this morning both speak of mothers and fathers: Hannah and Elkanah, Mary and Joseph. All play their part, but the focus is on the mothers. Hannah was childless. She was granted the gift of a son. In the preceding passage we hear her asking for this, making a vow to the Lord that should she be granted a child she would dedicate him to God. The scene we are allowed to look in on is of her giving up her son. The cost is heart rending. She gives Samuel up when she has finally weaned him. Traditionally weaning was up to three years. Wet nurses were not uncommon in those days, before milk substitutes. Consider the bond that had grown between the mother and her child. Hannah keeps her promise. She gives him up. With the appropriate offering made she lends him in our English translation to the Lord not expecting to receive him back. For as long as he lives. I can't imagine the emotions of that day.... Allow it to sink in.

The other story sees Mary and Joseph in the Temple in Jerusalem having dedicated their first-born to the Lord. They in contrast to Hannah will return him home with their son. He will grow up in the bosom of an earthly family. Simeon on seeing the child speaks of a divine promise fulfilled. He foretells what this child means for the people the world over. Simeon has a word for Mary. Just as the angel had a word for Mary at the conception of Jesus. Let us hear those words again.

'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

These are hard words of promise. Many will rise because of this child. "He hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things. He hath holpen his servant Israel." Many will fall because of this child. "He hath put down

the mighty from their seat. The rich he hath sent empty away.” Mary your son is a sign, the fulfilling of God’s promise that will be opposed. The inner thoughts of many will be revealed. “He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.” And finally a sword will pierce your soul as well. Mary you will not be spared. This is not an easy word to bear.

When thinking about today, the situation we find ourselves in Europe, the thoughts of many being revealed, and above all the mothers I have known at Christ Church, the word I was directed to was the word sorrow. In quick succession three mothers connected to this church have departed from us: Marty Siwy, Friedl Beckley and Tatiana Hartzell. Each much loved by their children. Thinking on sorrow I was reminded of the biblically based Seven Sorrows of Mary which in one instance speaks to the plight of those fleeing Ukraine with their children these past weeks. I remember consciously coming across the Seven Sorrows of Mary for the first time in a painting hanging in the Kunsthalle (art gallery) in Hamburg. The seven sorrows are:

1. Simeon’s prophecy, which we are considering today.
2. The flight into Egypt. The despot then was Herod - and today?
3. The Loss of the Child Jesus in the Temple. Jesus goes missing. I still remember panicking, when I lost sight of Victoria as a small child in department store in Cologne.
4. Jesus on the Way of the Cross. I call to mind mothers who seek to help bear the cross of their children’s suffering.
5. the Crucifixion and the death of Jesus.
6. The body of Jesus is taken down and laid in the arms of His Holy Mother
7. Burial of Jesus, with Mary’s tears and loneliness.

Against each of the sorrows I can put a name or names of mothers I know and have known in the family of God. Although these sorrows are specific to Mary and seen from the vantage point of a mother, they have a timeless dimension. They include us as well as fathers, daughters, sons, godmothers and godfathers etc. During the farewell discourse Jesus says to the disciples, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” (John 16.33) We must always be prepared, nourished in faith, for a sword to pierce our hearts as well. We are not exempt from pain and sorrow. We are not exempt from tribulation. Mothering Sunday is a day full of emotions. For some Mothering Sunday is too hard having lost a child. It is often said that the hardest thing a mother must bear is the loss of her child, to predecease their

child. I don't want to dwell on what mothers and parents in must face. But many a mother has known as Mary will know "A sword will pierce your heart as well". Love remains.

God does not leave us comfortless. And although the pain and sorrow is great, this is the other side of parenthood often masked on Mothering Sunday. The gift of children with all the caveats is gift. It is a gift to be treasured. It is vocation. Let us all seek to bring them up in the faith of Christ that gives hope. Let us nourish them in the faith that sustains us.

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