

Mothering Sunday 19.03.23 St John and St Stephen's Reading (with renewal of wedding vows for Laurence and Marjorie Nicholls) Exodus 2:1-10 & John 13:31-35

“Taking the Long View”

It's lovely to be here today to celebrate with Laurence and Marjorie, who on this day 40 years ago promised to love, serve and cherish each other, ‘within the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit’. By all accounts, you seem to have made a pretty good job of it. So, warm congratulations are in order to you both (& to Sue and Chris Jupp).

As your 40th anniversary falls on Mothering Sunday, we have a mixture of things to think about and mark this morning, both to do with our Christian heritage and how we experience our wider society doing “Mother’s Day”. In addition, we have two readings about God’s loving faithfulness: one where Moses is fished out of the Nile, and the other about Jesus’ commandment about love.

So, there are a lot of things to hold within this one service of worship.

I wonder what memories or experiences you bring to this Mothering Sunday? If you were an English church-going child, the stand-out memory may well be the posy of flowers. We still give flowers today – but in a way that signifies our aspiration to be more inclusive. It used to be primroses, and I have a vague memory that the Sunday School would traipse into the local woods to pick them.

That is out of the question in these days of environmental awareness, of course. Then there’s the increasing sensitivity, which I think is proper, that Mothering Sunday as we have received it (largely via its commercialisation) is not everyone’s favourite Sunday. When there’s an exclusive emphasis on how wonderful mothers are, it can feel difficult for those who have lost mums, or lost children, or who never became mums, or for whom mum was a difficult figure.

Despite this being a service where we’re celebrating a long and happy marriage, there may be comfort for some today in knowing that our role model, Jesus, never married and never sired children. His instruction that his disciples should ‘love one another as I have loved you’ is about ‘agape love’, selfless love – the sort of love that shows family to be much wider – as wide as the Universal Church, in fact. Agape love is also the kind of love that keeps a marriage going in the long term, as we learn to offer and receive forgiveness.

Our first reading also takes us in an interesting direction this Mothering Sunday as the apparently hopeless situation of one of the condemned Hebrew baby boys is redeemed thanks to some courageous females. Of course, we all know that the book of Exodus is about Moses – whose name means ‘to draw out’ – but there wouldn’t have been a Moses without his mother’s carefully hiding him in a water-proof basket, his sister’s keeping watch and Pharaoh’s daughter adopting him.

To go further back into that part of the story of salvation we would also want to honour the two Egyptian midwives who feared God more than the Pharaoh, and didn't kill the baby boys, as per their orders. Instead, when questioned by Pharaoh, they told a story about the Hebrew women being more vigorous than Egyptian women, and basically giving birth before the midwives arrived. What a wonderful celebration on Mothering Sunday of what we might call 'holy female cunning'.

A final thread to pick up today is the theme of refreshment. Just as in Advent we enjoy a 'Rejoice' Sunday (aka 'Gaudete') today, on the fourth Sunday in Lent, we enjoy 'Laetere Sunday', which means 'refreshment': a Sunday on which traditional Anglo-Catholics don rose vestments, in all their rose-y pale pink glory. So, contrast this dazzling array of men in pink with the pink of Mother's Day adverts and you have the wonderful and sometimes puzzling clash of ecclesial and cultural sensibilities that characterise Mothering Sunday.

Refreshment in Lent seems like a very healthy concept, particularly if you are practising some sort of fast at the moment. Mother Church, in her wisdom, has tried historically to get a balance between discipline and relaxation, between the penitence of Lent and the hope of Easter, as mirrored in the blossoming of Spring. To get that same balance of challenge and refreshment is something we face in our own walk with God, and in how we do Lent as a church.

In the story of Moses, the one who is rescued goes on to be the rescuer of God's people. God's word takes a long view of salvation. In the bible, salvation is born out of waiting and hardship. The same word for patience also gives us 'passion' – as in the Passion of our Lord. Similarly, Jesus gives his instruction to 'love one another' on the eve of his own suffering and death. Love and loss are normally inextricably bound together. It may feel like that for you today.

I think even our fellow human beings who won't feel the slightest need to go to a church to celebrate Mother's Day, know deep down that amidst the froth of pink adverts and cut-price pub lunches, this day carries both joy and sadness. Good news, though: God's word is realistic about the demands of love. Love needs courage and realism. Love brings rewards, but it is costly.

And the cost and effort of love over the long term is something we celebrate with Laurence and Marjorie today. Together as a church family, we honour your commitment to each other, your love and faith and your Christian presence in the heart of our parish. We enjoy your fellowship in the café and in church each Sunday, and your wisdom borne out of many years of family and church life.

May God, who takes the long view, refresh you as a couple, and fill you with all hope and blessing as you give thanks for your 40 years together and look to the future with trust in

God. And may the same God who heard his people's cries and who gave Jesus for the life of the world, refresh us all this day as we continue our worship together. Amen.