

Exodus 2:1-10 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. 'This must be one of the Hebrews' children,' she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Yes.' So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, 'because', she said, 'I drew him out of the water.'

Luke 2:33-35 And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, '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.'

Mothers' Day and Mother Church

The story of Moses is often set for Mothering Sunday. Moses is a gargantuan figure in the Old Testament. As a hero of faith he is honoured by all three of the Abrahamic religions: Islam, Judaism and Christianity. He's certainly one of the bible 'Greats'. But you know what they say about a great man: 'Behind every great man is a great woman' (or, as Jim Carey put it, 'Behind every great man is a woman rolling her eyes').

Behind Moses, then, we find a series of resourceful, courageous and canny women. Their names are Shiphra; Puah; Jochebed; Miriam and Thermouthis. Firstly, Moses has been saved from being put to death at birth by two midwives who disobeyed the Pharaoh's instructions to kill the Hebrew boys. Secondly, Jochebed has given him birth and saved him by sailing him down the Nile in a waterproof basket. Miriam has watched over her baby brother to see what will happen to him. And finally Pharaoh's daughter (whose name we only know from extra biblical sources) has drawn him out of the water* and become his adoptive mother.

That's a lot of great women behind one great man, and it's wonderful to remember them on this Mothering Sunday.

Our gospel reading featured of course the words said to Mary as Jesus was presented in the Temple as a six-week-old baby: 'a sword will pierce your own soul too'. You won't find that little message on any Mothers' Day cards.

Which brings us to today. Today is another example of the somewhat awkward clash of the biblical narrative with customs which we observe in this country around Mothers' Day – which include cards, gifts, flowers, the advertising of all things pink and the, admittedly, nice opportunity to give thanks for your mum and everything she means (or meant) to you.

Mothering Sunday has become a Sunday where those of us who lead worship also want to remember those for whom any focus on mothers or mothering holds pain. It's ironic really, because Mothering Sunday, when you had a rare day off to go back to 'Mother Church' (and by implication your family home) was a day for all to enjoy, and was not primarily about mothers, but about Mother Church.

Mothering Sunday (“Refreshment Sunday”) St John and St Stephen’s Reading. 10.03.24

I don’t know if you’ve ever considered the phrase *Mother Church*. It’s more of a Roman Catholic concept, but I like it. In so far as your faith has been born, nurtured and grown within the fellowship of a church, then *Mother Church* fits as an image. The church has given birth to our faith, it has nurtured it and (if it’s doing its job well) it will be giving us resources to become mature in that faith.

We’re very mobile these days and you may not be able to identify a Mother Church as in a church of your childhood. Some people come to faith much later in life, and some have sadly had bad experiences in the Church. So *Mother Church* may not be a helpful image for you, especially if the word ‘mother’ is already problematic.

But perhaps what Mother Church and Mother’s Day have in common is that they each (at their best) provide a ‘good enough’ model of care to instil into us a belief that we are worthy and loved, which is the best thing a parent can do.

Mothers are stereotyped as the ‘go-to’ person when we’re sad, worried or upset. Even in these days of equal opportunity, there’s still a feeling that it’s mother who’s the primary care-giver and often the mother who is left, literally, holding the baby. With mum and dad couples, it’s sometimes the mother who ‘gets it’ quicker than the father. I hesitate to say these things, but like all stereotypes, there’s perhaps a grain of truth in it.

Only this week I went to a funeral where the son of the deceased talked a lot in his eulogy about how loving and caring his mum had been; how both parents were fully committed to their children, but how it was mum who had the nous when it came to the big life situations.

This was illustrated by the occasion when his sister’s long-term boyfriend came to the house, uninvited, with something important to share. The mum instantly guessed he was about to ask for permission to marry their daughter. And she was right. The dad, extremely surprised, thought he’d come to talk about the cricket.

But of course it’s a mixture with mums. Some mums haven’t been parented well themselves and you cannot give what you haven’t received. Post-natal depression is a real thing. Some mums can’t let go; some are overbearing or embarrassing. We don’t always have a smooth ride with those who mother us.

In preparation for this talk I asked my three what embarrassing things I’d done as a mother. Initially, they couldn’t think of anything – and pointed out that maybe I could use Chris as an example instead. But then, there were two examples of me being embarrassing that stood out. I made my daughter wear sensible shoes from Clarks, instead of pumps from Primark, and (quote): ‘they made me look like something from the cast of *Call the Midwife*’.

Another example was that owing to a mis-reading of the instructions from the secondary school about sewing name labels on PE kit, I apparently sewed Thomas’s name in large cross stitch letters across the front of his PE shirt, instead of putting a small label inside the collar. The House colours were bright *orange*, and *no other parent had done this*.

Today some people will have stayed home instead of come into a space where motherhood might be put on a pedestal. Perhaps Mothers’ Day is not for you. Perhaps ‘Mother Church’ is also an alien concept. To end, we’ll spend a few moments returning to the Scriptures for today.

The idea of Jesus’s young mother being told that a sword will pierce her heart is something that is very moving. It’s not a jolly message for Mothering Sunday, but it is realistic. When we care for someone deeply, their suffering is acutely painful to us. In Catholic art, the pietà is one of the most powerful images – that of Mary holding her son in her arms after he’s been taken down from the cross.

In the reading from Exodus, the mother of Moses has to let go of her baby son, only to receive him back to nurse him – but only till he is weaned and then adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter. We assume after that, she had little or no contact with him ever again.

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No reflection on Mothering Sunday would be complete without the complexity of real life. Across the world, mothers mourn sons (and daughters). If our Saviour is indeed Saviour of the world, he has to have been caught up in the sorry mess that it often seems like we have got ourselves into.

We all lose our mothers eventually. For all sorts of reasons, we need a bigger concept of mothering to embrace than simply the celebration of the one that gave you birth – although that is a good thing to do, if you can.

In both our readings, the characters are caught up in something much bigger than them. Mary would know sorrow like a sword but she would also be present in the upper room when the risen Christ sent his Spirit to empower the disciples. The great women behind Moses were part of God’s plan to draw Israel out of slavery and lead them to the Promised Land. Human experience is such we often cannot see the big picture but we can take these stories as illustrations of the need to trust God and trust the process of our lives.

We’re still in Lent and in Lent we remember that Jesus was driven into the wilderness to face his Tempter. We go through phases of our life where things are pressing in on us – like Jesus we look to God for strength and guidance; we cling to God’s promises when faced with difficult choices and we cast ourselves on God because he cares for us.

On this Mothering Sunday, may we know the care of God that carries us through our losses and is reflected in the love that our mothers nearly always intended us to know.

Amen.

*Moses means ‘to draw out’.