

here is your mother

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' The words of a dying man, tortured on a cross, may seem a strange reading for Mothering Sunday.

It's always a challenge for anyone preaching, in how to address a day that for some is an absolute pleasure and for others, is much more complicated, and even confronting. The fortunate among us have had positive experiences of motherhood, but are well aware that for others, that's simply not the case. Not only are there those who have had difficult relationships with their mothers or children, there are also those who still feel acutely the loss of a mother or child, and others for whom what should have been a primary nurturing relationship has been a source of pain and sadness or worse. For others, it exacerbates an unfulfilled desire for children who never arrived. Nor should we forget, that the original Mothering Sunday – as opposed to the now largely secular Mother's Day – was in fact a celebration of the church's role as mother, on which churchgoers would attend not their parish church, but their mother church – the cathedral. So it's a complex day with a complex history, to which the greetings cards shops, for obvious reasons, make no reference.

This year brings additional challenges of its own here in London, as we gather only days after the horrific Westminster attack, in which two of those murdered were parents – the heroic police constable, Keith Palmer, father of a 5 year old girl, and Aysha Frade, who was on her way to collect her daughters - aged 11 and 8 - from school when she was mown down on the bridge. We hold all the victims and their families and loved ones in our prayers today at this desperately sad time.

We remember too, the children and widow of murdered MP Jo Cox, as they face their first Mothering Sunday without her. I'm reminded of Brendan Cox's words in the days following his wife's murder: "And what the public support and outpouring of love around this does, is it also helps the children

see that what they're feeling and other people are feeling, that the grief that they feel, isn't abnormal, that they feel it more acutely and more painfully and more personally, but that actually their mother was someone who was loved by lots of people and that therefore, it's OK to be upset and it's okay for them cry and be sad about it." It was heartening to see the crowds of people attending the vigil in Trafalgar Square on Thursday and I hope and pray that the newly bereaved families will find support and comfort in the same public support and outpouring of love.

Earlier in the week, before Wednesday, I found myself reflecting on a number of people whose lives speak to me of both the joys and the pain of mothering, and all of them are in my thoughts today, so I want to share four snapshots with you. Closest to home is a woman who lived on the other side of the Atlantic. Her daughter, Suki was a visiting student and my next door neighbour, for my first term at university. We became firm friends right from that first night and when, after graduating, I spent a month visiting Suki and other friends in the USA, Suki's parents were wonderfully welcoming. The following summer I returned for another visit, this time joining Suki and her Mom on a brilliant road trip, driving from the East Coast all the way across to California, where Suki's Dad joined us and we spent a wonderful week staying with her Mom's family. By the end of the trip, Suki's parents decided to unofficially adopt me, and ever since then have referred to me as their British daughter, and I've called them Mom and Dad Barber. It was an enormous pleasure when they visited London many years ago, to be able to introduce them to my parents, and then to see the four of them together again in Ely Cathedral for my ordination.

Mom Barber was one of the sweetest natured people I've ever met; kind, caring and unfailingly warm and welcoming. She didn't have a career as such, but for her the role of wife and mother was not a duty, but rather the greatest joy of her life. But she was no stay-at-home Mom, rather an intrepid, capable and accomplished Navy wife, who took not just house moves but country moves in her stride, frequently left home alone with three young children for months at a

time while Dad Barber was away at sea on active service. She relished the opportunity to live in different places, and delighted in getting to know, and introduce her children to, different cultures and experiences. When she died last September, after a valiant battle against the ravages of Alzheimers, I was both grateful and honoured to be invited to conduct her funeral service. It's one of life's little ironies, that although Mother's Day in the USA and Europe always falls on the second Sunday in May, here in the UK, Mothering Sunday is always on the fourth Sunday of Lent and this year, coincides with what would have been Mom Barber's 84th birthday, and so for me, she feels particularly present today, and I continue to give thanks for her.

This is also the first Mothering Sunday since Jo Hines and I visited Bosnia with a delegation from *Remembering Srebrenica* last autumn, to learn about the 1992-1995 war. It was a powerful and hard-hitting trip, inviting us to engage firsthand with the horrors of genocide. Meeting survivors and hearing their stories was immensely powerful, but one particular meeting stood out as the hardest of all. It was at the mass cemetery in Potočari where we met with Myeera, one of the Mothers of Srebrenica. Prior to that, the survivors we met were those who had been young men at the time, who are now married with children of their own. Mother Myeera lost not only her husband and father, but also her three sons and her grandson. She spoke to us briefly of her loss and her life today, the pain etched across her face and deep within her eyes. Not only her past, but her future was ripped away from her, and she now lives alone with her memories. After that there were no more words, only tears and hugs. It was heart-breaking. Today, I think of Mother Myeera and all the Mothers of Srebrenica.

On Wednesday evening when I got home, I read a much-needed and wonderfully heart-warming Facebook posting from a friend and colleague, Georgie. Since January she has been delighting her friends and followers with regular updates on her two children, who she refers to as Cub no.1 – who is 6, and Cub no. 2, who is 3. That evening she posted: "Cub no 2 has taken to using the baby monitor thingy as a walkie-talkie. Today's offering: "Mummy, when you come in to say good morning I'm going to give you an extra kiss because you're my best friend ever!". This will be Georgie's first Mothering Sunday as a mother. She's in her 30's and single, and in January, adopted the two siblings. We don't yet know their names, and although she is a brilliant photographer, for obvious reasons, she can't share any photos, but the updates

have been one of my highlights of the year so far. A few prime examples:

- a photo of the book "Goodnight Stories for Rebel Girls" with the caption, "Just discovered cub no 1 hidden under her duvet reading this by torchlight. Greatly encouraged!"
- Overheard cub no 2 talking in his sleep, "Oi dinosaur, stop swimming in my gravy . . . that's MY Yorkshire pudding!"

and most recently,

- "First ever Mothering Sunday card received from cub no.2 via nursery today. Judging by the amount of glitter mysteriously all over cub no. 1's bedroom carpet, I think an equivalent work of art is secretly in progress!"

Georgie is clearly proving to be a fantastic mum, although one or two fleeting references such as "not a tantrum in sight today" serve as an important reminder of the magnitude of the task she has so willingly and joyfully embraced. Today I rejoice with and give thanks for Georgie and her cubs.

The last snapshot is of an extraordinary community in Canada: the Green Acres Colony of Hutterites in Manitoba. I came across their story through the UNHCR website. Hutterites are a minority religious group loosely related to the Mennonites and Amish who trace their roots back to the 16th century. They who are easily recognisable by their distinctive clothing. Women wear long, colourful dresses and black headscarves, while men dress in dark trousers, work shirts and braces. One of the teachers in the community, Paul Waldner, reflecting on an observation that Hutterite colonies could each make a difference by helping refugees in need, approached his father, the president of the colony, who told him: "Our ancestors were refugees long ago – people were always there to help them." So the colony registered for the Canadian scheme to privately sponsor a Syrian family. A month later, they drove to the airport to greet Najwa, her husband Reyad and their two young children, a 4 year old daughter, Raghad and a 3 year old son, Ali.

Najwa, who was pregnant and wears a hijab, remembers being very apprehensive about arriving in a new country with unknown customs, but was relieved when their sponsors came into view, "When I saw their dress – preserving their heritage and their origins for over a hundred years – this made me very happy," she says. She loved that the Hutterites still spoke German as their first language and that minorities in a large country could keep their identity

and traditions. "This country doesn't force anyone to change."

Reyad speaks of the generosity of their Hutterite sponsors: "They are always by our side, whatever we need. They just want us to be comfortable." Paul's wife Wanda speaks fondly of the two Muslim little ones, of how Ali's endearing persona drew them very close, and of how Raghad was very shy in the beginning, "but now her personality has really come out and she's dynamic – a little bubble of adventure".

Najwa recalls how the birth of their third child, a daughter, brought home to her the full depth of the bond: "I don't feel I am living in a faraway place when I'm with them. Even siblings wouldn't do the things they did for me. They would come and carry the baby all night long. They told me, "Just go to sleep and rest. We will take care of the baby." Elaine, another of the colony sponsors reflects: "I would never have imagined that I would go to the hospital and a Muslim woman would have a baby and she would feel so much like my sister."

Wanda sums it up: "Najwa and her family are like family to us now. What we have is beautiful and precious." Even Kayla, Paul and Wanda's daughter, who was initially sceptical, has been won over by the Syrian couple and their children, admitting, "I never, ever, in a million years, would have figured they would snuggle their way into my heart as easily as they did."

From Hutterite Paul to St Paul. *"Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."* The apostle's advice to the Colossians, which we heard earlier, can rarely have found such beautiful expression.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, *'Here is your mother.'* The words of a dying man, tortured on a cross, may seem a strange reading for Mothering Sunday. But they are words which embody the very best of which human hearts and relationships are capable. They point, as did Jesus with his life, his teaching, his example, and in these dying words, to the deep and abiding truth, that whatever our own experience of mothering, whether it's a source of joy or sorrow, or a mixture of both, we are all part of God's family, a family in which love reaches out far beyond biological ties and genetic kinship, a family in which all are wanted and welcome,

all are longed for and loved, all are cherished and chosen, and all can truly belong.

"And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home." Amen.