



no mothers were harmed in the making of this sermon

No mothers have been harmed in the making of this sermon. Indeed, my plan had been to make no mention of them, or rather, no mention of *Mothering Sunday*, still less *Mother's Day*.

Mothering Sunday is amongst the liturgical fixtures I am a little spooked by. It carries a risk which increases in proportion to the way in which mothers are lauded and praised for being all-round remarkable things and motherhood itself as an unparalleled fulfilment and consummation.

I don't want to join that Mother Fest. I don't want to risk, for a second, causing distress to those who wanted to be mothers and are not; those who have been mothers and have experienced the death or loss of a child or children; those who are mothers where relationships have not worked out that well and who might too easily reproach themselves for not being the archetypal mum. And I don't want any woman who has chosen, consciously or unconsciously not to have children, to feel, for a second, that as a consequence she is diminished.

Not, perhaps, the best opening to a sermon on this particular Sunday, though I expect many of you here will understand my hesitations.

The history of this mid-Lent Sunday is not entirely clear, and the claim that in the 16th century it was the day when people were expected to journey to the cathedral seems only one possibility, the other being that what was expected was attendance at their 'mother-church' which may have been the cathedral but was also understood as the church you'd been baptised in, or the local parish church.

Those who did so were said to have gone '*a-mothering*'. In later times '*Mothering Sunday*' became a day when servants were given a rare Sunday off, to visit their mother-church, usually with their own mothers and family members and so allowing families to be together. This annual

family trip to the mother-church morphed (it is thought) into the strong associations with mothers and motherhood, and was later snaffled by modern commercial interests and the rest, as we say, is history.

Underlying all this is the tradition that this mid-Sunday in Lent is one where Lenten obligations were relaxed, suspended, and this gave rise to other names for today, in addition to *Mothering Sunday*: *Refreshment Sunday*, *Mid-Lent Sunday*, *Simnel Sunday* (because *Simnel* fruit cake was made and eaten before the Lenten restrictions returned) *and* also *Pudding Pie Sunday* (for reasons the internet god won't reveal, except to say that this name was generally confined to Surrey...).

So we are half way through the season of Lent, the purpose of which is to ready ourselves for the best possible keeping of Holy Week and Easter. And by that rather delicate term '*keeping*' is meant encountering the events of Holy Week in such a way as to unseat us: not to entertain or even to edify but to unseat us - to move us from where and how we are to something deeper, something which bottoms out our humanity, broadens our horizon and hope, feeds us with fresh unimagined possibility and purpose.

That is best achieved by using our brains *and* hearts in tandem and relating the historic events of Christ's final weeks to the concrete aspects of our lives and using both to springboard ourselves into a better grasp what our lives, lived under and with God, could be about.

If you have not yet put the Holy Week dates into your diary please do so. Come along and participate. You are part of the church and we shall be diminished without you. There will be moments of seriousness, discomfort, absurdity and even humour of a sort. For me, following Larry the Donkey on Palm Sunday as we process around the church perimeter always

has an element of absurdity. We rent him for a couple of hours every Palm Sunday (I believe at the London Living Wage but that's something to check). Sometimes he is good natured and sometimes wonderfully grumpy.

Sometimes our perambulation is interrupted by his braying (that adds to the drama) or by his call of nature (on one occasion tsunami like in its quantity and duration). From one perspective this re-enactment in today's West End is absurd, yet woven into the same liturgy is the dramatic reading of the Passion story from the gospel, which can make you shiver by its economy of words and its impact – and by its absolute relevance to London's West End, as to everywhere else.

A touch of humour of sorts creeps in every Maundy Thursday (at least for me). The liturgy on that night - which marks the start of what is called the Holy or Paschal Triduum, the three solemn days through to the evening of Easter Day - contains the washing of feet.

You know the reason of course: it derives from the story in John's Gospel where Jesus washes the disciples' feet. I find it in part comic because of the discomfort it generates in Western, mainly White, sensibilities. Observing the alarm this invitation can cause you'd think we were offering Class A drugs as part of the service. Maundy Thursday this year is 29 March. Please be part of it, with your feet and soul just as they are and without embarrassment, and enter into the disturbance of this ancient liturgy. We are offered Christ's friendship and care and in no time at all we make common cause with his accusers. Good Friday is a day of mourning. It is possible to say a lot about it but generally best to say very little. We mark it with a three hours gathering here, as is common across the church. Wherever you are, and even if that day your job requires you to work or care for others, it is possible and proper to contemplate the death of Jesus, the person the church calls our Lord, and to reflect on the meaning – we should say *meanings* – of what happened on that fateful day. The day after is a day of hibernation as the body rests in the tomb and we allow ourselves to wonder whether anything we ever believed or knew carries any weight or substance. And then. And then, on the next day, we dare to assert the absurd claim that Christ is Risen, and we

celebrate that with as much energy and flourish and animation as we can muster, here in church for sure – and (at least this is our aim and real calling) in our lives.

Throughout the events of Holy Week an important character is Mary, his mother, and in this morning's (wonderfully short and punchy) Gospel her own suffering is predicted by Simeon. And so, despite my efforts, some further consideration of the theme of this Mothering Sunday seems called for.

So at the risk of upsetting the applecart – or at least recent tradition - let us praise mothering, and all the women and men who practice it; to praise and thank God for all those women and men who in the wondrous complexity of ordinary life conceive (-conceive babies, ideas, actions, art, solutions and possibilities); all those women and men who faithfully nurture and carry to term these very things; all those women and men who bring to birth these same things; and all those women and men who in countless ways protect, nourish, teach and 'mother' others – whether children, projects, institutions, the ill, the economy, the idea the world is waiting for, the idea or service the world needs.

Let us praise that aspect of human beings which is concerned with these things, and which has its place alongside other aspects of our being human, such as challenging and building and demolishing and contending and ploughing and harvesting. None of these is gender-specific. Mothering is a way of relating to the world which links directly to God and to God's mode of being, not least in relation to the whole of this glorious Creation. And it is something to which all of us are called. Biological motherhood is one thing, and a most significant thing; mothering is something more, and is a way of relating to which all are called in the fullness of their humanity.

On this mid-Lent, 'refreshment' and Simnel Sunday (Pudding Pie Sunday for those of you from Surrey), take a break from Lent, and remember all those who have mothered and nurtured you, and those for whom you have been able to do the same. And be thankful.

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