



14th March 2021
The 4th Sunday of Lent (Mothering Sunday)
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly
The Revd Lucy Winkett

*May I speak in the name of God – Creator,
Christ and Holy Spirit.*

As we make our way through Lent each year, this 4th Sunday is also Mothering Sunday. And we celebrate it this year in a week that has been a bleak one for many women. The celebration just a week ago of International Women's Day has been subsumed by frenetic and forensic examination of the role of the first mixed race woman to be a senior member of the royal family, with all the attendant sound and fury on social media not to mention breakfast television. But if only that were the main reflection on gender to have come out of the events of this week. Last night's vigils in memory of Sarah Everard, murdered in this city as she walked home alone, were cancelled, but the pictures today of women held down by police on Clapham Common has led to the first female Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police to face calls to explain herself. The terrible crime committed against Sarah Everard has sparked a conversation not just about the random attacks on women by strangers, because in fact there are more random attacks on men by other men, but the every day harassment and violence experienced by women because they are women.

Ever since I was a teenager I have walked in the middle of the road with keys between my fingers. And if a recent UN report is right, then at least 7 out of 10 of the women here at this service or online have been sexually harassed in public in the UK.

(https://www.unwomenuk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APPG-UN-Women_Sexual-Harassment-Report_2021.pdf)

And just as the most recent iteration of the Black Lives Matter movement has emphasised the role of White institutions, groups and individuals as obviously the problem, so the public conversations this week have also emphasised the role of men, all men, in challenging the behaviour of other men, rather than leaving it to women. One prominent media outlet was criticised by describing the news item as 'women's safety concerns' and was challenged to change it to 'male violence concerns'. Our own Bishop Sarah has recently been part of sponsoring amendments to the domestic violence bill currently going through Parliament to ensure that women trapped in situations of domestic violence, which we know have reached epidemic proportions in lockdowns, will still be able to access help even when they have no control over their own money.

A serious consideration of public festivals, rituals, conversations about and by women, and reflecting on gender, will include Mothering Sunday, not least because Christianity has form in being part of the problem for women.

Until womanist and feminist perspectives and now gender-fluid or trans perspectives have brought such life and creativity to the consideration of gender and religion, Scripture that tells the stories of girls and

women has been preached from a male perspective only, which is why it is so important that women are public and leaders in religious spaces.

And so Mothering Sunday takes its place in this public reflection; and has the potential to be a deep and fruitful moment, not a shallow commercial reinforcement of unhelpful stereotypes.

I hope that most actual mothers have a really good day today despite the restrictions. I hope that there are deliveries of flowers and cards; maybe some socially distanced walks in a park for exercise. I hope that there is some fun, some zooming or facetime, some chances to acknowledge across the generations that becoming a mother is one of the most demanding, challenging, heart-breaking, anxiety provoking, joyful jobs in the world. I hope that many mothers today feel thanked and appreciated, I hope they feel seen.

There are two Biblical women in the readings today. One of them doesn't have a name, although later in the Book of Numbers her name is revealed as Jochebed. This woman's astonishingly brave actions save the life of her baby. She is living as part of an enslaved people; the Israelites in Egypt. In the previous chapter of Exodus, the Pharaoh has issued an instruction to the midwives who attend Israelite women that in order to control the enslaved population, boy babies should be killed, while girl babies can be spared.

Thus in common terminology, you could say that the baby boy here is in danger of both gender based and racially motivated violence. So his mother hides him for 3 months and when she can't hide him any more, makes a water-tight basket and floats him in a thickly covered part of the river, and stations her other older child – Miriam

– to watch and make sure that he doesn't fall in. Hoping perhaps that someone might come and rescue him or find him.

This is mothering in a highly precarious situation; mothering that many mothers in the UK will recognise as they try to teach their sons how to survive in a situation where as young men, especially young black men, they are more likely to suffer discrimination and violence. This is mothering in a highly precarious situation; which will be recognised by many mothers in the UK today who in this pandemic have visited foodbanks for the first time, asked elder siblings to look after younger children while they hold down two jobs, tried to find ways, even to the point of giving their children away, of giving their children a better life in a precarious financial and social situation. The choices that Jochebed makes are recognisable to women across the world, and to many women in the UK.

Moses her son grows up to be the figurehead for a movement of liberation that leads the people into the desert away from slavery. He doesn't get to the promised land himself, but he knows that the people will get there. And he owes his own life to the actions of a mother and daughter in a shockingly dangerous occupied land.

Being a mother when there is little money, systemic violence, state-sponsored discrimination is something that women across the world know today. Mothering Sunday doesn't have to be a saccharine celebration of an ideal that women, mothers or not, simply can't live up to. Although it can feel that way. Mothering Sunday is about discovering the agency of these Biblical women who are determined to act bravely and wisely even when the societies they lived in told them they had little power.

The gospel figure of Mary is even more difficult to reach sometimes, dressed as she is in centuries of artistic representation in lapis lazuli, rather wan, rather passive.

But the biblical Mary is nothing of the sort. In this gospel, short as it is, there's so much there under the surface. Mary is in the Temple as a new mother. She's first of all simply amazed at the reaction her new child provokes, as new parents often are; second, she's on the receiving end of some very unwelcome truth, and third, identified as a woman who will suffer, and here the language is violent in itself, a 'sword through your very life' – which in our translation today has been described as her 'soul'.

The figure of a mother is indelibly marked into every human life. Either because of the presence of your biological mother or because of her absence. Or because of the mothering you have received from another person, whatever gender they may be.

That we have all been born, somehow, means that the relationship is an irreducible one whatever twists and turns life takes.

So this day is complicated. For some it is just straightforward, but I'd like to suggest not really for many. Maybe you are missing your mother today, or conversely really glad she's around. You may have been afraid of your mother, or you may have never known her. Maybe you are grieving the loss of her. Maybe you were desperate to be a mother yourself and in the event you struggled with it, or never were. Maybe you never wanted it and felt judged by a society that thought you weren't a proper woman unless you did.

But alongside focussing on actual mothers, and how that goes, there is something about Mothering Sunday- for all its complexities and tensions - that goes very

deep it seems to me; I don't *simply* mean the recognition that there are people beyond your immediate family whose nurture commitment have been a kind of 'mothering'. I mean something wider again: 'mothering' as a kind of giving-over of yourself to something or someone; mothering as that which draws out resources you didn't know you had.

Today's women invite us and challenge us. Biological mother or not, after the example of Jechebed, what is it that you will fight to save, even when you are in a situation that seems hopeless and you think you have no power? For whom will you stick your neck out, take action to protect? For whom or what will you challenge the system? Be creative in getting round the rules?

And in the spirit of Mary, we might ask ourselves; who or what is it that unlocks our heart? Even to the extent that our lives can be pierced through, by the consequences and demands of the same love that first stormed its defences and threw wide the doors. The poet Mary Oliver wrote in her poem "Lead":

"I tell you this to break your heart, by which I mean only that it break open, and never close again to the rest of the world".

What is that, for you? What does that do to you? What do you love? What do you want to protect, and see grow, and set free? It might be your work, your children, a cause, another person, a project, some form of artistic expression, something or someone you teach... What breaks your heart - *by breaking it open so that it never closes again to the rest of the world?*

To love *like that* is to give expression to something of the fierce, utterly self-given, utterly available, patient, creative love that's holding the stars apart and the universe in

being, and became incarnate and visible in Christ, and Christ crucified –the fullness and utterness of divine love, whose fingerprint is on every soul. That’s something of what we mean when we speak of being made in the image of God, perhaps.

And the miracle is, that it’s on you too - that all the fullness of that compassionate, creative, divine love is focused and poured– not some impossible ideal of *anything*, but you as you are – all the time, endlessly, inexhaustibly. And it’s focused and poured in equal and inexhaustible measure on the person standing in front of you at any given moment. It’s when we begin to see ourselves and one another as objects of that endlessly creative and compassionate love - as we are, not as we or anyone else thinks we should be, it’s then that the kindness and patience and forgiveness that Paul talks about as the marks of the new community in Christ which we call the church can begin to grow and develop.

And so our prayer today might be both as individuals and collectively in our hurting society, that we might pray honestly and daringly for change in our society, which must begin with us. That we, whatever our gender, might more deeply discover our capacity for mothering: and dare to pray.....

God, as I live in your world and go through my life, break my heart.....may it be *broken open so that it never closes again to the rest of the world.*

Amen.