

Address from Bill Pattinson for the Fourth Sunday of Lent

“Called to Care”, Mothering Sunday 14.03.2021

Happy Mothering Sunday or Happy Mothers Day?

Mother’s Day has its roots in early 20th century America. A beloved day of affection and celebration for mums thanking them for all they do; an opportunity to spoil them with breakfast in bed, to send cards and flowers and enjoy family meals around the table. The problem is with such a celebration that it’s not totally inclusive. Those who are childless or motherless or who have lost an only child may feel cast adrift. A mother’s role may be the domain of the father or grandparents or other relations or friends.

Mothering Sunday, on the other hand, is a distinctly religious festival started in the 16th century. The word “mothering” refers to “mother church”, the main church or cathedral of the region. Traditionally on the fourth Sunday of Lent, people would return to their mother church, where their faith was first born and nurtured, for a special service. This pilgrimage became known as “going a-mothering” (I love that phrase) and it became something of a holiday event. This is a totally inclusive festival for all Christians.

Today, in many ways, both festivals have been put into the pot and stirred - we celebrate both mothers, whoever they may be, and mother church. I certainly recall my mum on this day, giving thanks for all she gave and sacrificed for me. Her year’s mind was this last Thursday. It’s 18 years since she died. A wonderful woman! My mother church was St. Paul’s, Scotforth, Lancaster, where I sat with mum or dad in the choir stalls as a babe in arms, growing up to attend church as a choir boy three times every Sunday, not forgetting choir practice on Thursday evenings. My faith was born, nurtured and developed at St Paul’s. For this I also give thanks. The most important thing is that both mother and the church are called to care. The Austrian philosopher and theologian, Baron Friedrich Von Hugel wrote:

“Christ taught us to care

Caring is the greatest thing

Caring matters most.” **Address from Bill Pattinson for the Fourth Sunday of Lent**

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Caring matters most."

So what constitutes "caring"? What are the values and attributes of caring, of mothering? These questions will be considered as I continue.

Our two readings this morning concern two wonderful, godly mothers Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, was desperate for a child, so desperate that she wept and prayed regularly at the temple, often overseen by the priest, Eli. She prayed that, if God granted her a male child, she would dedicate his life to God, that he would become a Nazirite. Now a Nazirite is a

child consecrated to the service of God, who is placed under vows to abstain from alcohol and to let the hair grow. Eventually, Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son, whom she named Samuel, which means “God heard”. When Samuel was weaned, Hannah took him to the temple and handed him over to Eli fulfilling her promise that his life would be given to the Lord. Samuel grew up to be one of the greatest prophets and judges that Israel has ever known. All mothers recognise what a painful, selfless and sacrificial act this would be. Often the cost of caring.

This morning’s Gospel Reading from Luke is one we recently read at Candlemas. Notice once again, the Temple is the heart of this passage, the link to Mother Church. Mary and Joseph, as brand new parents, are bringing their child, Jesus, to the Temple to thank God for him and to dedicate him to God’s service, in a similar way as we might do at an infant baptism. They are met by Simeon and Anna, as if in the role of wise supportive grandparents. They recognise the child as not only the Saviour of Israel but also of the Gentiles. Yet this realisation is coupled with the disturbing words of Simeon to Mary that “a sword will pierce your own soul.” Once more we are reminded how painful parenting can be. Not only the deprivation of sleep, not only the worry when children perhaps stay out too long and eventually go their own way and you simply have to let them go, but in Mary’s case, as in many others’, the excruciating pain of burying your own child. Mary must have felt the nails herself going into her own hands, the sword in her own side, as she stood at the foot of the cross of our Lord.

Of course, the emotions associated with caring, with mothering, are not always burdensome and painful. Paul writes to the Colossians “..clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience...above all clothe yourselves with love.” These are the attributes of a carer, a mother and the church, to which we more readily subscribe. No doubt you could add more. I like the values of calming, encouragement and gentleness expressed by Carl Sandburg, the Swedish-American poet, in these words:

“Here is a thing my heart wishes the world had more of:

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To a mother singing softly to a child restless and angry in the darkness.”

I've followed with interest the argument that countries like New Zealand, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Taiwan, Iceland and Bangladesh, all of whom are led by a woman, have been more successful in the fight against coronavirus. These women were seen to be more open, more authentic, more truthful, more inclusive, more decisive and more trusting of the science and technology than many of their male counterparts. Jacinda Adern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, in the early days of the pandemic, hosting an informal Facebook live question and answer session from her home, dressed in slops began, "Excuse the casual attire, it can be a messy business putting toddlers to bed." Can you see Boris adopting a similar open, authentic approach? Erna Solberg, the Prime Minister of Norway, recently interviewed on the wonderful "Woman's Hour", held coronavirus instructional lessons for children to help ease their fears. How inclusive is that? She explained, "I think some leaders are motivated by love and care of their populace, while others will use fear and power."

The irony of all this is that we are still living in a political society, which hugely undervalues mothers, showing an ignorance or an active decision to ignore their needs; in a society which doesn't value care leaving it primarily in the hands of the private family. Caring professions are still not given the recognition they deserve. Indeed women are still the main carers. Natasha Walter, founder of the charity "Women for Refugee Women", writing recently in the Observer wrote, "The pandemic is bearing down hard on working mothers and risks turning the clock back on women's equality."

If we are to be true disciples of Christ, to adopt the values of caring, the attributes of being a loving mother, the compassion of an inclusive church, then surely we need only to look to the Great commandment "To love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves."? Julian of Norwich wrote:

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