

HOLY TRINITY SUNNINGDALE

Readings: Exodus 2:1-10

John 19:25-27

Date: Sunday 6 March 2016 – Mothering Sunday

I do hope you have had a good week. We certainly have: Terry and Jane and Sue and I have been in Harrogate (God's own country) on a conference. It's been a conference for 1700 church leaders mainly from the UK but from many other countries around the world too.

We had the Archbishop of Canterbury as one of the speakers. He spoke passionately about the kind of church he longs to see. We had Brother Edward who ministers with the Open Doors Charity on the ground in Syria. He spoke most movingly about life and death in the cities and towns of a war-torn country and about the possibilities for the church to serve in a very dangerous place.

We heard from Charlotte Gambill, who looks a bit like a super-model, but who leads churches in the north of the UK and Ireland. She spoke about transition and the awkwardness of moving from the old to the new – using the image Jesus draws of the old wine and the new and the OT picture of Elijah passing on the mantle to Elisha. Charlotte really focussed our minds on the need for succession planning and the equipping and enabling of the next generation for ministry and mission. Such a lot to reflect on and think further about.

Last week we completed our series on the letter of James. Today is Mothering Sunday ... and the Bible readings we have heard speak about two mothers who lived in the same general part of the world, but many hundreds of years apart. The unnamed mother of Moses and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Their lives could not have been more different. In a situation of secrecy, the mother of Moses is invited to bring him up in the palace courts. She would have known surroundings of wealth and opulence and plenty. She would have been very well aware of the royal family and would have lived very close to them in their day to day world.

By contrast, Mary the mother of Jesus is invited by an angel to give birth to this special baby. In relationship with and then married to Joseph, she would bring up her son in the surroundings of the family business, the workshop and the carpenter's bench. Not a palace by any manner of means, but not a situation of abject poverty either.

Although it's not an exact parallel, with Hugh Bonneville on Desert Island Discs on Friday, it makes me think about Downton Abbey or Upstairs Downstairs. Those who have a great deal and those have less. Two mothers in two quite different contexts.

And yet as we shall see, in spite of their different backgrounds and environments, the mothers have something very critical in common with each other. And they have something to teach us about the sacrifice of

motherhood: Moses' mother gives her son up in a basket to the Nile. Jesus' mother, Mary, stands at the foot of the cross (with John his closest friend) and gives her son up to die. Sacrifice is absolutely at the heart of who these two women are and what they have to teach us.

You don't need me to tell you that motherhood is a really tricky and complicated thing. As we know, not all women become mothers; many, of course, do and have their own children naturally, others with the help of medical intervention and others again, by adoption. Whether we are or are not mothers, the truth is we all have or have had had mothers and have known them as part of our life to a greater or lesser extent.

You will not be surprised to know that I come across mothers in various contexts. I guess you can imagine:

The young mum who is asking about baptism for her newborn baby or toddler

The mum who is anxious about a place for her "first one" to leave the safety of home to venture out to that scary place we call pre-school or even proper school

The mum who has just discovered a test result or a prognosis which is not good news

The mum who has to juggle her former career with her new one: discovering that multi-tasking in the office and at home can be overwhelming and you feel like you are doing nothing well and just want the world to stop spinning

The mum who has an important title: the "mother of the bride", a new role with all its challenge and complexity

The mum whose child is struggling with teenage years which in her day used to be so much more straightforward – before the internet and before instagram and twitter and sexting and cyber bullying, not to mention drink and drugs (obviously, not to mention drink and drugs)

The mum who is not quite sure what to do now that her children have flown the nest and gone to live somewhere else in the country and can only get back to the "home" they grew up in every now and again: home is a different place now the nest is empty.

And the mum whose own mother needs more help than she thought she would, with health issues and the basic things of life which suddenly become more complicated and worrying. The unexpected phone call in the middle of the night. The umpteenth we have been through this or that – you must have just forgotten ... again!

I come across mothers in various contexts. And although they seem very different at the different stages of life, there is that common thread of sacrifice, of giving something up, of giving the child up maybe in some way or another which is both costly and painful and very hard work.

What then can we learn from Moses' mother and/or Jesus' mother?

I want to suggest one simple thought that, in making sacrifices of so many different kinds, you are not on your own (even though sometimes it really feels like you are):

You are not on your own ...

God is there

Other people are there

God is there

It's very clear from the early chapters of Exodus that God is intimately and inextricably linked in with the story of his people. He is there in the shaping of the history of the world. He is there in the establishing of the nations and the people in them. He is there and he knows all about Pharaoh and all about the decree relating to the killing of children. He is there and knows all about the birth of this little boy and about his mother's decision to try her best to save him by setting him afloat in the reed basket on the river. And God's purposes are served by the little basket's not capsizing, by the baby's cries being heard in the bulrushes (we imagine), by the Princess' discovery of him and by her appointing his own mother as his nurse-maid. God is there.

For Mary, God is there in the message of the angel that she has been chosen to bear this special baby. God is there in the provision of a place to give birth safely. He is there in the visits from the shepherds and the wise men and in the heavenly, angelic choir. He is there at the Temple when mum and dad present their baby to the old man Simeon, and there at the Temple again when his parents are frantic, fearing they have lost their 12 year old returning from the festival. God is even there when Jesus

seems to reject his family and widen the scope of who is and who is not in the group. God is there.

There are times I know when it feels like God is far away. When this or that happens and we don't know what to do. Has he forgotten us? Has he abandoned us? Does he just not care? Things can seem so bleak, so overwhelming and so out of control. We just need to remember as God was there for the mothers of Moses and of Jesus he is there for us too.

Sometimes it can be that this sense of God's not being there is the beginning of our writing him out of our life's story. I hear many times people say that they lost their faith when this or that happened. And yet, these things which can cause some people to drift away from God can also be those things which call us back to him. If only we could see that he was there and not absent. You are not on your own.

You are not on your own .. God is there.

You are not on your own ... Other people are there too.

Other people are there

It is very clear from Exodus that the mother of Moses had other people around her. For sure they were initially just immediate family, but as time went on they would be official people and important people. Other people are there.

For Mary, we know that she went to talk to her relative Elizabeth and pick her brains about their babies who would become cousins – Jesus and John the Baptist. We know she sought help from those at the Temple (official people) and those who were travelling with them when Jesus was 12 and went missing. We know there were other children born to her – Jesus was not an only child. And we know that she was present with John at the very end and with the disciples in the process of the new beginnings in Acts chapter 1. Other people are there.

One of the wonderful things about the conference this week in Harrogate was a lovely sense that we are all part of God's amazing family. In the UK and right around the world, if we are Christians, we are part of something very much bigger than just us.

And in times of celebration and in times of sadness and despair it's good to remember that. Other people are there.

Obviously many years ago now, (we have three children who are 24, 22 and 19) our own experience was that ante-natal classes were terrific. They are still terrific I am sure. For us they were terrific in getting us into the delivery room. I can still remember the feeling of slight apprehension when they said we could take Zoe home. It felt exhilarating but also a bit scary – a massive responsibility and apart from the 6 weeks ante-natal, very little training.

Kathryn and I are both first children and we had had no nieces and nephews to practise on! We had had more

driving lessons to take our driving test than parenting lessons to bring up a little one. You might look at our children today and say: "Well that's obvious – you clearly didn't know what you were doing!"

You are not on your own – God is there and other people are there.

We so valued the wisdom of our mothers – they were there but not in our faces. They had done it all before but didn't impose or interfere or irritate. I realise that this is a great blessing and not everyone's experience. The mother in law horror stories are all well known. Not so for us.

Other family were there too – brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles to our three: special treats and special time with other significant adults in their lives.

Our friends were there: some had children of their own and our three have some friends they have literally known all their lives. We are all still very close. But some single people also our children think the world of and love spending time with. Even now, Zoe and Tim have (quite independently and off their own bat) phoned friends of ours in London when they have been up there for training and asked if they can stay over or meet for a meal – or both!! And the answer is always yes. It brings us great joy to know that others are there, sharing the role of being a parent, speaking into our children's lives and helping mum do a good job.

In church we have been greatly blessed by some of the older generation who, when our three were little, have baby-sat for our children. In doing this they have enabled mum (and dad) sometimes to have a night off and do something special. You may never know how much we have valued and appreciated those small acts of kindness ... and the children will still tell you who the best story-teller in the village is and the one who brought the best sweets!

A simple message for mothers and for all of us this Mothering Sunday ...

You are not on your own .. God is there.
You are not on your own ... Other people are there too.

I hope you will think it's OK but we have bought gifts for mothers today to illustrate this simple thought. Last year for the dads we bought a toilet twinning and gave away loo rolls. This year for the mums we have bought chicks and pigs ... and a little chocolate egg as you leave. The chicks and the pigs remind us that mums have such an important part in bringing us up, making sure that we are OK and have enough. For mums in Africa where these chicks and pigs live, they are signs of God's blessing and signs of his wonderful provision for family and for friends.

The chicks and the pigs tell mums the simple story and reinforce the simple message that God is there and other people are there too. And they help us to celebrate and to give thanks for the sacrifices that are so often made by mums for their children which are, when we stop and think about it, both an inspiration and a great gift.

Let's pray ...