

Mothering our Community

How do you solve a problem like Mother's Day? For those of you who may have as much as an appreciation as I do for musical theatre, you may recognize the question as a twist on the great philosophical question at the centre of the Sound of Music, how do you solve a problem like Maria? Now for most of us who watch the film or have seen the show this is an odd song, there is nothing wrong with Maria. Who wouldn't want to be running barefoot in the glorious Austrian hills, dancing and drinking in the beauty of nature, especially when the alternative is being surrounded by somber black clad religious types all day! So, when the Mother Superior joins her sisters in wondering what can be done, I wonder how many of us think, what's the problem?

Which is where I think the similarity applies to Mother's Day. Like Maria, how can there be a problem with something so sweet and nice?

Well, firstly there is the religious problem, Mother's Day is a twentieth century commercialization of an existing religious tradition, and worse still it's an American import! Mothering Sunday is the root of the tradition, when on the fourth Sunday of Lent with Easter almost in sight, the Lenten restrictions were lifted as people gathered in the mother church or Cathedral. Over time this became associated with a convenient day to let children who were in domestic

service return to their parishes, to go to church and to see their mothers, on the way they would pick flowers or take cakes and buns to celebrate the, albeit temporary, lifting of the Lenten discipline. And this in turn transformed into the commercial opportunity that the last century loved so much.

Then there is the social problem. With so many families fractured, so many different ways of being family, what does motherhood mean for those who have known no mother, or who have suffered at the hands of a mother, or for those who desperately want to experience motherhood but are denied the opportunity? And here's my favourite bit, why is it so often up and down the country that white, middle aged, middle classed, heterosexual men will hold forth on the joys of motherhood. It is perhaps the biggest joint mansplaining event which the church does with relish. At least we're subverting one of those this morning.

Our readings this morning, don't immediately answer the problem either. Both the OT and the Gospel have an interesting and perhaps surprising approach to the mothers presented in the stories. Both are set against a backdrop of hate, fear and death. And Paul's words are those to people who are suffering. It is not a million miles away from the context we find ourselves in. Families separated by war, mothers waiting to hear for news of their

children in Iran, in Gaza, Israel, Ukraine and Russia; families struggling with rising costs and low wages; families separated by ICE and crackdowns on immigration. What can something so sentimental as Mothering Sunday offer to the world context we find ourselves in?

Well, our readings aren't exactly saccharine sweet, are they? Jochebed, Moses' mother, gives up her baby son that she has secretly hidden from the death threats of empire, not once but twice; first to the river and secondly to the very empire that wanted him dead in the first place. Mary stands watching her son, the one promised by God, given by God, who was supposed to be the Saviour of Israel, die an agonizing death on the cross, like a common criminal, killed by empire. We only know the names of both women from other sources; they are not named in these stories, and yet without them, without the hidden years of love, and care, of pain and hurt the Israelites would have remained slaves and the world lost in its own destructive violence.

Mothering Sunday is not full of niceties, rather it asks us to confront the fundamental questions of a world and society that allows empire to thwart and ultimately to take innocent lives. Not just in self-glorying war but in the way that compassion is lost.

We heard St Paul remind us of "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation," from our reading in 2 Corinthians. Paul uses that word consolation 10 times in four sentences. He's writing to the Corinthians again after what is known as his "painful visit" to them, a visit we think that was necessary after Timothy found the situation in Corinth worse than was feared. Paul's second visit was a failure; he was undermined and appeared timid and ineffective fact to face. He left Corinth planning to return quickly but instead wrote another letter from Ephesus that we no longer have¹. It is the suffering that he endured in Ephesus that is the background to our reading this morning, his focus on the consolation of Christ, amidst the afflictions and suffering of his ministry, on behalf of the Corinthians. There is an interdependency in Paul's sufferings and Christ's consolations, a new way of understanding how we are inter-related as the Body of Christ, the family of God.

And it is exactly that that is happening in the gospel reading. At the moment of his death Jesus creates a new community, he gives his mother into the care of the Beloved Disciple, and the Beloved Disciple into the care of his mother. "Because of the cross and from the moment of the cross a new family of Jesus

¹ Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp.541-543

has been created.”² Mary and the Beloved Disciple, both epitomes of faithfulness and discipleship are brought together to create a new community, a new family, around the cross.

Mothering Sunday invites each of us to consider our place in that family, for we all have a place. It’s from the Gospel passage that some traditions see the growth of the idea of Mary being the mother of the Church, the maternal role in this new family. But even if we hold that it doesn’t stop with Mary, all of us are called to show the compassion and care that we see at the foot of the cross.

It’s something that came very clearly out of our PCC discernment weekends, how are we called to be a mother in this community, to care and bring compassion? How are we called to bring care and compassion to each other in this family, with our pastoral care group and beyond? I’m aware that over the last year and a bit a growing number of us here have lost loved ones, have experienced the grief of bereavement, of becoming widows or widowers. Bereavement and grief affect us all very differently, there’s no one size fits all

² Francis Moloney, *John*, p.504

approach, but how do we as a family, and as individuals show our care to those who are navigating painful and new realities?

In the Lenten preface to the Eucharistic Prayer, we have heard week on week how in this season, “we learn to be [God’s] people once again.” As we consider today what Mothering means we do so in the context of what it means to be God’s people to each other, to our community, to the world; what it means to be a new kind of family drawn together around the cross of Christ.

In the Sound of Music, the ‘problem’ of Maria is solved when she falls in love and becomes mother to the Von Trapp children. It might be a neat and tidy conclusion, even if it has some basis in truth, but it also shows that mothers are all around us. Maria didn't give birth to the children, but she does have compassion and care for them. We are not all mothers, for any number of reasons, but we are all called to show the care and compassion, the fierce love, and the presence of a God who is both our Father and our Mother. As we continue our journey to the great feast, may we do so with our eyes and hearts open to those who go unnoticed and unnamed, may we do so learning to be a child of God again, learning to be the people of God again, and may we do so bringing the God of all consolation into encounter with individuals who

Exodus 2:1-10
2 Cor. 1:3-7
John 19:25b-32

need God's compassion, through our prayer and our action. Learning to be
and living as the family God truly makes us into.