



## Revd Ro's Reflection on Fourth Sunday of Lent

### Year A

**Colossians 3.12-17**

**John 19.25-27**

This Sunday is the Fourth Sunday of Lent. It is known by several names, Refreshment Sunday because the Lenten fast was relaxed on this day, also of course it is Mothering Sunday which has existed from mediaeval times and it took place on Laetare Sunday that is the mid Sunday in Lent. People who were away returned if possible on this day to worship once a year at their mother church, that is the one in which they had been baptised. The tradition carried on throughout the centuries and people continued to return to worship at their local parish church or the cathedral, which is seen as the mother church of the diocese. Those who did this were said to have 'gone a mothering.'

I have always loved Mothering Sunday and as a little girl I particularly loved saving my pocket money to buy mum a little gift. Dad and I would go down town and he'd be with me while I carefully chose it. In those days we were hard up, so I didn't get much money but it was mine and I loved saving for her present. One year I set my heart on something. I knew mum loved the Native American culture. There was a beautiful figurine of a chief on a horse that I was determined to get for her but it cost £5. In those days it would have been half a week's wage. I wouldn't let dad buy it. By the time I saved enough the shop had gone out of business. It took me till I was about fifty five to finally locate one on the net and it was no longer £5! But I was determined that I would finally get it for her, it symbolised my love for mum. Imagine her delight and surprise when it arrived. We always have a traditional simnel cake on Mothering Sunday with eleven balls of marzipan on top symbolising the eleven loyal apostles.

Once again this year we have enjoyed watching 'Mary Berry's Easter Feast.' In the series she invites people from all sorts of Christian communities to bake their Easter dishes. Some are fascinating; and one community celebrates Easter after a strict vegan fast for Lent followed by a complete fast on Good Friday. They then have cheesecake and other wonderful foods on Easter Day. The cheesecake is marked on one side with a cross and on the other with 'Christ is risen.' She looks at the cooking

from all over the world, including the Caribbean and Poland, learning about the Polish Babka Easter cake. Mary looks at the Alban bun, reputed to be the first example of the hot cross bun. They were first baked in the early 1300s at the monastery at St. Alban's and were spiced and marked with a cross. They were distributed to the poor on Good Friday. Mary then bakes a simnel cake, sharing it at tea with the Archbishop of Canterbury, as you do! It is a wonderful and touching moment as both have lost children. The Archbishop talks of Easter as the earliest Christian festival, celebrating the wonder of the resurrection. Death is conquered by new life, and so of course they think especially of the children they have lost. He talks of the wonder of human love and especially the family love which they share.

On Mothering Sunday we give thanks for mother churches and the love we have received from our own mothers throughout our lives. Today as we celebrate Mothering Sunday and thank God for the love we have received we pray for all mothers throughout the world especially those who try to care for their children in times of war or want. Our hearts and prayers go out to the mothers of Ukraine who are witnessing horror on a huge scale and desperately trying to provide for their children in impossible conditions. Also we remember the mothers and children of Turkey and Syria affected by the devastating earthquakes. We think of mothers around the world in areas of conflict or disaster who are feeling the helplessness and grief that Mary feels in our gospel for today.

As we think of Mary the mother of our Lord we think of her great love for her son. The gospel reading deals with Jesus' crucifixion. This reading will always take me straight to Comberford Church and the wonderful life sized wooden figures showing exactly this scene. Jesus looks down at Mary at the foot of the cross, St. John 'the beloved disciple' is on the other side. The carved figures stood below the chancel roof arch, highly symbolic of course. Also the church was dedicated to St. Mary and St. George. Our own cathedral is the cathedral church of St. Mary and St. Chad.

For so much of the time Mary is a shadowy figure in the gospels. But her love for her son is clearly seen both in the stable at Bethlehem and at the presentation in the Temple. It is there that Simeon has a stark warning for Mary, 'and a sword will pierce your own soul too.' We see her suffering and love for her son as she stands at the foot of the cross. No one can imagine the heartbreak of a mother having to witness such evil. Yet she does not run away like so many others did, deserting Jesus in his hour of need. Her obedience, her self-sacrificing love remains constant to the end. She does the only thing she can do, stand with him and share his agony giving all her love to him. At the end it is his mother Jesus thinks of, he turns to her in love and commits her to the care of John 'the beloved disciple,' his friend.

<sup>26</sup> 'When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' <sup>27</sup>Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.'

These are some of the most poignant words in the gospels.

One of my favourite novels is 'The Dean's Watch' by Elizabeth Goudge, one of the central characters describes the love of Christ thus,

The love of Jesus 'dazzled behind the stark horror of Calvary. His love held and illuminated every human being...the cathedral, the city, every flower and leaf and creature, giving it reality and beauty.'

It is this love that we celebrate today as human love is a reflection of the love of God.

Although it is Mary Magdalene, not Mary Jesus' mother, who witnesses the resurrection, we hear of her again. She is one of the first 'Followers of the Way.' In the Book of Acts (1:14), we are told that

she was with them in the upper room. Mary was there at the festival of Pentecost and she too received the Holy Spirit, the comforter whom Jesus had promised he would send to them. Mary is unique in the human race, she carried our Lord God. Her faith, her courage, her fortitude, her trust and her total self-giving love even under great stress are an example to us as we try to live our lives as followers of Jesus.

Mothering Sunday is not simply about love for mothers, it is a celebration of all human love and fellowship. It is about the church of Jesus Christ where we should find fellowship with one another and the power of Christ's saving love.

So what is the pattern for that kind of church, for that kind of fellowship? Paul often condemns division in the newly formed Christian communities; there is no room for it. Paul, in our epistle reading for today, is giving the Colossian Christians instructions on how to behave and explaining what the foundations of the church of Jesus Christ must be. It is useful to put our gospel passage into context by reading from the beginning of chapter 3. Paul begins the chapter in this way, <sup>3.1</sup> 'So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, <sup>3</sup>for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup>When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.'

If we accept Christ as our saviour and Lord then we are, or should be a 'new creation.' That is why Paul uses the word 'So' at the beginning. He is contrasting 'the things that are above with earthly appetites and behaviour. He is not saying they should put their heads in the clouds. By accepting the words of Paul about Jesus Christ they must respond by living in the way Christ requires, not in ways to which they were accustomed.

<sup>5</sup> 'Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). <sup>6</sup> On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. <sup>7</sup> These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. <sup>8</sup>But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. <sup>9</sup> Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices.' I think it is important to see what Paul says prior to our reading, to see just how much he understands the ways these Colossians have been used to. It is time for them to turn their backs on all that he says and adopt the way of Christ. By quoting these sinful actions Paul emphasises the great difference in the Christian life as it should be lived. Besides which in Christ all are equally loved and important. They are brothers and sisters in Christ, part of a new family, the family of Jesus. What should govern that family is very different from the ways that held sway before. Just as at baptism water washes away sin they must as it were put on fresh behaviour as they would clean clothes.

The passage that follows is I think one of the most beautiful in the New Testament. It is a celebration of love in community.

<sup>12</sup> 'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.'

Putting this next to examples of the old behaviour emphasises Paul's point more forcefully. Just look at the list of qualities here. Jesus requires these of us just as much as the early churches. The order I think is important too, 'compassion and kindness;' come first, next humility and which Christ embodies. Now, in this period of Lent, in this time of self-examination we must ask ourselves do we

try to do the things emphasised by St. Paul? It is a time not just to ask the question but to work at clothing ourselves' with these qualities.

Everything in the early church was not a bed of roses so far as behaviour and relationships went, any more than it is now. We are all human and fallible. So what do we do when injured? Well Paul goes back to Jesus' words 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.'

<sup>13</sup> 'Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.'

Forgive does not mean condone. It does not mean you don't point out when a person is behaving as they shouldn't. It does mean you don't hold grudges. Paul is not being idealistic here; he is setting out the word and way of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> 'Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

<sup>15</sup> And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.'

Paul again goes back to Jesus' teaching and specifically his 'new commandment,' to 'love one another as I have loved you.' This is one of the hardest things to do but Jesus loved so much he went to Calvary for those first Christians and for us. Love is costly, being a Christian is not easy but if the church is to do Christ's work here on earth then the qualities outlined in our reading for today are vital and necessary. They are central, not peripheral. Think of the word love as compassion, maybe that makes it clearer.

Paul is, if you like, giving a recipe, just as a cook like Mary Berry would. Follow the recipe and the dish will turn out well, ignore some ingredients and you will get something, but the outcome will bear no resemblance to the original. It is the same with the Christianity, ignore Paul's instructions which are based on the teachings of Jesus, and the result will be anything but the church of Jesus Christ. Paul is forceful; he has to be because so much depends on it. That's why he puts the catalogue of former sins before our passage for effect.

<sup>16</sup> 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.'

This summary is quite beautiful. Base your life and your church life on Jesus' word. Do that and you've cracked it! Ignore it at your peril. That is Paul's advice. 'Teach and admonish one another,' the teachings of Christ must be central but Paul has his feet firmly on the ground, when things do go wrong don't be afraid to speak out. When you do though, do it in Jesus' way. Jesus was never afraid to teach God's way in the face of opposition, he spoke up against all that he saw as wrong. Any church, any church member must be answerable.

I love Paul's instruction for worshipping together, putting Jesus and the worship of God at the centre. 'Sing psalms, sing hymns, and spiritual songs to God.'

It is wonderful to think of those first Christians worshipping as we do now, of ourselves singing the same psalms as they and the Jewish people before them had sung for generations. We do not know what those hymns and spiritual songs were but I like to imagine the early Christians gathered together to worship God in total commitment to him and with love and joy at the centre.

Paul's conclusion summarises this passage. It is, in a nutshell, the way Christians should behave.

<sup>17</sup> 'And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.'

Whatever you do if your motive is Christ centred, not self-centred, you won't go far wrong. When people go their own way, obey their own desires, put themselves first above others then things go

awry. Note the list of behaviour at the beginning of chapter 3. That must not happen in the church. Paul is emphatic about that. 'What would Jesus do?' is a good adage.

It is worth going back to the beginning of this reading and taking time to be quiet and read it slowly again. How then is it a challenge to us and our churches? How this Lent, are we going to put ourselves right and sweep away the old clutter? Conversely what have we to celebrate within our relationships and our behaviour?

This Mothering Sunday we thank God for his great love to us in Jesus Christ, for the Christian church and for the love of our own mothers but also for the God given gift of human love and compassion. We thank God for fellowship wherever we find it and we need to make St. Paul's words our aim.

<sup>12</sup> 'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.'

We know that love is eternal and evil will be vanquished. So we celebrate the great power of love today, a love shown at Calvary and mirrored in the lives of ordinary men and women.

*Love of the Father, love of God the Son, from whom all came, in whom all was begun.* Robert Bridges

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