



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Mothering Sunday

Colossians 3.12-17

John 19.25b-27

The fourth Sunday of Lent is Mothering Sunday. It is also known as Refreshment Sunday as the rules about the Lenten fast were relaxed on this Sunday in Lent.

The readings I have chosen to concentrate on are from Colossians and the reading from John. Partly because I think they are wonderful readings but secondly we have looked in depth at Luke 2: 33+ which is of course the presentation of Jesus in the temple. The Old Testament reading is 1 Samuel 1.20-28. I wrote about this in my Reflection for Epiphany 2. This is where Hannah, who is barren, prays to God for a child and gives birth to the boy Samuel. In thanks she gives Samuel to God under the care of the old man Eli. The touching part of this story I think is where Hannah visits her son each year and brings him a little coat.

The traditional readings for the fourth Sunday of Lent from the Book of Common Prayer were from Galatians 4. 21. and John 6.1. The first deals with the children of Abraham and Isaac who is the son of Sarah 'the child of promise.' It also mentions 'Jerusalem which is above which is the mother of us all.' The other is the story of the feeding of the five thousand set on Refreshment Sunday and fits in with refreshment but also the bounty of 'mother earth.' The tradition of Mothering Sunday goes way back into history and has no connection whatsoever with the American tradition of Mother's Day. It is quite different.

Mothering Sunday has existed from medieval times and it took place on Laetare Sunday that is the mid Sunday in Lent. The fast was relaxed and people returned to worship once a year on this day to their mother church, that is the one in which they had been baptised. The tradition carried on throughout the centuries, people continued to return to worship at their local 'mother' churches on this Sunday. That is their local parish church or cathedral, which is seen as the mother church of the diocese. Those who did this were said to have 'gone a mothering.'

Youngsters would begin their working lives at an early age and people were given time off on this Sunday to return to their mother church. They had time with their families and the term was extended to include their own mothers. It became the tradition to take flowers to mothers. The tradition of baking a Simnel cake grew up because this is Refreshment Sunday and they could eat cake on this day. No one really knows the origin of the name though maybe the best explanation is that the name Simnel probably comes from the Latin word simila which means fine wheat flour usually used for baking a cake.

I used to take a Simnel cake into my Mothering Sunday assemblies at Flaxhill and use one in Mothering Sunday sermons in church. They are rich fruit cakes with two layers of marzipan and are topped with 11 marzipan balls to represent the 11 disciples minus Judas the betrayer.

This year of course Mothering Sunday will be very different because of the virus. Actually I have been shielding here since March 14th last year. The fellowship of Mothering Sunday service was so very special but we can still celebrate it in the best way we can as we give thanks for our mother churches and the love we have received from our own mothers.

The gospel reading deals with Jesus' crucifixion. This reading will always take me straight to Comberford Church and the wonderful life sized carving of exactly this scene. The cross is central; Jesus looks down at Mary at the foot of the cross, John 'the beloved disciple' is on the other side. The carving was below the chancel 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 she is seen in her full stature standing at the foot of her son's 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. And at the end, Jesus even in his agony, turns to her in love and commits her to the care of John the beloved disciple.

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. So Mary was there at the festival of Pentecost and she too received the Holy Spirit, the comforter whom Jesus had promised.

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 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? Last week we saw Paul condemning division in the Corinthian church. There is no room for it. Paul, in our epistle reading for today, is giving the Colossian Christians instructions in 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,

¹ 'So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When 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.

⁵ 'Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁶On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. ⁷These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. ⁸But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹Do 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 back 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.

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

The putting this next to 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. 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 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 you do when injured? Well Paul goes back to Jesus' words 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.'

¹³ '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.

¹⁴'Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And 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.

Paul is, if you like, giving a recipe just as a cook 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 Christian church; 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, so much depends on it. That's why he puts the catalogue of former sins before our passage for effect.

¹⁶'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 worshiping together. Put Jesus and the worship of God at the centre. 'Sing psalms, sing hymns, and spiritual songs to God.'

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

¹⁷'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 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 churches?

This Mothering Sunday we thank God not just 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.

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

'Brother, sister let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you. Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.' Noel and Tricia Richards.

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