

Making space

Today's Bible readings are Mothering Sunday played in a minor key. Elegiac rather than celebratory, they lay bare the anatomy of loving: the visceral attachment of mother to child; the imperative of doing whatever we can for those in our care, no matter how great the cost; the agony of attachment *and* of separation.

Cultural expressions of this day play a different tune; foreground not mothering but mothers whose state, we're to be persuaded, is one of exuberance, joy and uncontested bliss. There is a place for such straightforward thanksgiving here; place for those whose delight in their children, whose love for their mothers, is uncomplicated, who today count only their blessings. For here is a place where joys are celebrated, graces are named, hope embraced. 'Rejoice with those who rejoice', Paul urges (Romans 12.15).

For others, today is tangled with complex emotions as lost or longed-for children are lamented, mothers are missed, and some of us grieve for the kind of parenting we needed and never received. There is a place for such profound sorrow here. For here is a place that embodies the truth that we're often caught up in a thicket of thorns before we reach our consolation. 'Weep with those who weep, Paul continues (Romans 12.15).

In this place, more than *any* place I can imagine, the brokenness and the transcendence of being human are enshrined. And so today we make space for one another and those whose hearts are in the Ruins stand alongside those whose spirits soar beyond the loft of this building or who party with the angels in Hutton's screen. Whatever biological family we remember today, we affirm that we are, to one another, sisters, brothers, parents, children, and in this family we make room for one another - all of who we are, all that we might feel. There is a place for you here; space for all you bring today.

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However we experience today, most of us will have known—or will come to know—the pain and challenge that can be the shadow-side of loving. What consolation, then, do our readings offer us? How do they help us bear the cost of our relationships? — Well, they speak, I think, of courage, community and compassion.

That Moses survives beyond his first breath is borne of *courage*, of the defiance of his midwives who risk their own lives to let him live. You see, these midwives ignore Pharaoh's murderous birth control of Hebrew baby boys—his order that the midwives kill them as soon as they emerge from their mothers' womb. Instead they let him live (Exodus 1.15-22). This is an exodus borne of women. See what love will do for the beloved.

And it is on a tide of courage that Moses floats from infancy to adulthood: the courage of his mother who places him in the bullrushes that he might be found; the courage of his sister

who watches over him and brokers his return home; the courage of Pharaoh's daughter who nurtures the life her father would destroy. See what love will do for the beloved. See what love will do for the beloved.

There is consolation for you here if you're frightened that loving might break you; if you count the cost of your caring and find it overwhelming. These women stand in solidarity to your pain, tell you that they, too, have paid a price for loving. They call you to courage, saying that in the extraordinary things you do, you are not alone.

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And it's this collectivism that's the second thing that's so striking about our reading from Exodus. It's not possible for any of these women, alone, to see Moses thrive. They can only do it together. So it is for us. Care is - *should* be—a collective noun. That's why today, in this Cathedral, we're giving *every* adult, and every young carer, flowers: to express this truth that caring needs community; that courage is borne in collectivism.

Take your flowers home with our love and gratitude and as you enjoy them over the next few days perhaps you could ask yourself how we might become more of a caring collective here; how we might share our lives more closely so that we're in a better position to carry one another's burdens, to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. This won't emerge only from a structural development—a new programme or initiative—but will mainly rely on each of us moving beyond the circles of our comfort to reach out to others, to take the trouble to ask real questions, to listen attentively, to risk giving real answers, so that we can live together in a shared reality. See what love will do for the beloved.

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Today's readings advocate courage and community in our caring and they offer compassion for our pain. Just as we have found, here, Mothering Sunday in a minor key, so Mary finds the moment she and Joseph dedicate their first-born to the Lord not one of simple pride, of unalloyed joy, but one overshadowed by loss-anticipated. 'A sword will pierce your own soul, too' Simeon warns her (Luke 2.35). See what love will do *to* the beloved.

There will be those here today for whom a sword piercing a soul is more than a metaphor; is, rather, lived experience as they recall the loss of their own children. Mary has compassion for you; the mother of God bore your pain, she felt it. Even at the resurrection she sees that her beloved child is still scarred by his suffering.

For many years, the Cathedral has been privileged to support bereaved parents through the *Remember our Child* ministry, where children have been prayed for on the anniversary of their death, and where parents have gathered month-by-month, year-by-year to form a collective of grieving and of remembrance.

Over recent years, this pattern of gathering has not been sustainable, and there has been no means to signpost newly bereaved parents to the solace of this community. And so, today, we are offering all that has been to God, entrusting all those children, all those parents, to God's eternal memory, to God's eternal care. Neither will we forget: we will continue to pray for the *Remember our Child* community, but in *different* ways; marking these soul-piercing losses especially on Mothering Sunday and All Souls.

There is no end to God's memory, no limits on God's compassion for you. Your loss is articulated in God's word, felt by God's mother.

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Mothering Sunday has its roots, not in the relationship of human mother and child, but in the parenting of the church. And so, in the 16th century, Mothering Sunday became the day when worshippers made pilgrimage to the church which had nurtured them and given them the life of the spirit. Today, cathedrals are described as 'the mother church' of the diocese. Mothering Sunday is a day, then, that asks particular questions of us, and of how we seek to nurture the churches in the Diocese of Coventry.

Caring, we've recalled, is complicated, costly, demands courage, and so is the caring this Cathedral offers as the mother church of the diocese, particularly at a time when 'the family' doesn't agree on how we interpret the Scriptures on questions of human identity. Some of our 'children' - if I can extend the analogy in that way— will be dismayed at the Cathedral's vocation to articulate God's blessing on those in same-sex relationships by using the *Prayers of Love and Faith*. Some might even feel they're unable to accept our 'mothering' because of this. How, then, are we to hold our diocesan family together, continue to be the place where the diocese gathers to recommit to our life together, to receive the wisdom of our acting Bishop?

The answer must be that we live out our costly, complex vocation of reconciliation, not only in far off countries but here at home, too, where reconciliation is often hardest-won because it is about you and me, not about some distant 'them'.

We must, then, practice what we preach: attend to the wounds caused by words unkindly spoken, or carelessly disregarded; inhabit the discomfort of acknowledging a diversity of views, some of which we find hurtful; learn to live with a difference that strikes at our deepest understanding; find ways of building a future of justice and peace with those who regard us, theologically, as their enemies.

A parent doesn't stop being a parent to the child who rejects them. A parent will always try to welcome that child home. So we must not be content to be the mother church to only *some* Anglican communities in our diocese, whilst estranged from others. Instead, we must

keep making space for *every* community with courage, collectivism and compassion. —Let us see what love will do for the beloved. Amen.