It’s Mothering Sunday! If you are a mother, congratulations. And commiserations – it’s not an easy role. If you had a mother: you are most welcome. If you feel that you fulfill the role of a mother for another, regardless of your formal role or gender, may you be blessed in the exercise of that task. As a one-time single parent, I know something of the joys and struggles involved. If you long or longed to be a mother, and have not been able to be one, may you nonetheless know yourself loved and cared for.

The role of a mother can be very conflicted, and has been known to cause conflict. As a mother, you will have brought life into the world, and you may well feel a responsibility for the ongoing nurture and development, the living out of that life which you gave to the world. That sense of responsibility can continue well into the adult life of the child, and can, on occasion, teeter perilously close to control, if not actually tumbling into it.

You may have experienced something of that in your own parents, or you may recognize it in yourself, as a parent. Whatever our experience, we gather today in thanksgiving for having been given life, for the privilege of bringing and giving life to others, in giving thanks for what has been good in our parenting, and in seeking forgiveness or healing for what has fallen short.

As we gather here in this cathedral church, on this Sunday, we also gather to reflect together on what it means to be the mother church of the diocese. If you are here as a visitor today, I hope you will bear with us as we continue to explore this particular calling, and that you will nevertheless find in our exploration a word of life for you.

I have enjoyed being away for twenty four hours earlier this weekend with the Bishop’s Council – a body of some 30 people who are tasked with strategic oversight and decision making for the Diocese of Coventry. I was really grateful for a considerable amount of time in the programme to talk together about the partnership of the cathedral and the diocese, especially in relation to the ministry of reconciliation. A cathedral and a diocese are in partnership in the service of the gospel – each needs the other – the cathedral should be a sign and symbol of the ministry of Christ in the diocese as a whole; the diocese looks to the cathedral as that gathering place where the bishop invites the people to join in worship and prayer, to be fed through word and sacrament, to ordain to new commitment and ministries through confirmations and ordinations, and so much more.

The cathedral is like the family home, for the family of the diocese. As the family home, it is a place which should be held in love, and we hope respect. A place where all in the diocese should know they have a place, whatever their circumstances. A place which above all should let them know that they are loved. A place to come to celebrate in times of joy; and a place to come to be held, whether tightly or more gently, in times of sorrow and brokenness.

Some of you will be travelling home later today, to be with mothers. Some of you will be welcoming your own children, grandchildren, or great grandchildren. Maybe you will have written cards, or arranged for flowers to be sent, or chocolates. It’s amazing what you can do with a few clicks on the internet these days – we have come a long way from what used to feel the minor miracle of the early days of interflora. What were your emotions as you wrote your cards, or made the plans for travel later today? For some of you, it will be quite straightforward: you know you are loved, you know you love in return – and it’s simply a day to celebrate that fact. Rather like the line in Baz Luhrmann’s Moulin Rouge: the greatest thing in all the world is to be loved, and to love in return. Yet for others, it will be more complex: yes, there was love, almost always, but mingled with other memories and emotions. Inevitably so: the process of growing up is one of flexing against that which brought us to birth, and eventually
breaking free. In the best of histories, that breaking free is followed, sooner or later, by rediscovering the relationship as adults, with shared responsibility and a maturing of affection and care on both sides.

I don’t wish embroil you this morning in amateur pop psychology. However, there are surely parallels to be drawn between our relationship with our physical, earthly mothers, and our relationship with the church. It is the church which gave us new life, in the waters of baptism which broke around us. The church which has nurtured us and seen us grow. The church which has blessed us, and has sometimes asked too much of us. The church we love, and where we are loved – but where we are sometimes driven to distraction. The place where we belong, like it or not.

And so to today’s readings, which have been at the back of my mind if not, perhaps, in yours as I have been beginning this sermon. They speak to us, I believe, of home. They help us understand that everyone has a home with God, because of God’s reaching out to the world through Jesus Christ – but also remind us that not everyone has taken up their place – the place that is set for them - around the family table.

And because that is the case – that not everyone has yet discovered that a place is set for them, kept free for them, we are all diminished – because not everyone’s there, we’re not all there ... and if we not all there, the family is incomplete. There are spaces at the table. We have to talk over a space. When we gather at great family celebrations, if we know someone is missing there is a sadness ... until everyone discovers their home in the Kingdom of God, there is a sadness in our hearts and in the heart of God.

But I am skipping ahead. How can I say that everyone has a home in heaven? Well, it’s a promise embedded in the epistle, the first reading, and unpacked and illustrated in the gospel, the second. There, we read that although humanly speaking we might really not want to associate with all sorts of people, people not like us - perhaps either better or worse – we actually don’t have the liberty to make those judgments anymore. It’s the same as with Christ: left to our own devices, we might just have seen him as an inspiring teacher who promised great things but who came to a sticky end – but now we know that he is the Saviour of the world, the man who was somehow God walking amongst us, who passed through death to everlasting life, and invites us to share that everlasting life with him. We look at him differently, and so we look at ourselves, and everyone else differently too.

With Christ’s death and resurrection, everything starts again: what looked like an ending became a beginning. It is the story embedded in the history and life of this cathedral: that when things went most terribly wrong in the destruction of the blitz, Christ revealed himself in wood and nails in the midst of the wreckage, and Provost Howard heard the whisper of the Spirit to look to the Father for a fresh start for everybody. This is our ministry and message: the reconciling love of Christ, bringing all the world back home to the Father, through what came to be known as the mother church. No matter how total the devastation, within or about us, there is always the love of God and a window of hope.

The windows of this cathedral symbolize in all the richness of their colour and design the light of God’s hope, his love and his salvation pouring into our world and our lives – revealing them in their true and wonderful colours, just as God sees them.

If there is a continuing tragedy, it is not just that our world still needs this message just as much as it did in November 1940, when the old cathedral lay in smoking ruins, but that the message of God’s abundant and astounding love remains unheard and unknown by so many. Even, if truth be known, by so many of us, as we struggle to allow ourselves to be held by God, and embraced in his love. There is a deep vulnerability in that place – the place of healing where our hurts are gently exposed and cleansed – which means we can find it difficult to find our way there. Can we trust? We have learned to stand on our own two feet: to be gathered back to God’s arms is to return to childlike dependence. That’s not easy.

But this cathedral is a place of reconciliation. And to be that, the barriers have to come down. And for us to be a reconciling people, we have to know reconciliation for ourselves.
I want to say something about the parable in the Gospel before I finish. I’ll be brief. It contains a wonderful picture of reconciliation, of the young son literally coming to himself, coming back to his true identity as a beloved child and falling into his father’s arms. It seems a shame there is no mention of the mother – but perhaps she always knew he’d come back! Yet there’s something about the story which only takes us half way to the truth of the gospel, if I may be so bold: if it was really true to the gospel, the father might have gone and eaten pods in the pigsty with the son until he was ready to come home. God’s love comes to us wherever we are – astonishingly, he makes his home with us until we are ready to come home with him. You may need to know that for yourself. Or, you may need to ask how we can embody that truth as we exercise the ministry of reconciliation on Christ’s behalf today? Are we ourselves going out to where those who are lost may be found? And are we welcoming to them into the home which is both their and ours when they return?

I’ve spoken quite a lot about home today. The message of the gospel is that we have a home in the Kingdom of God, an eternal home, which no one can take away. It is a home which should find an embodiment, some physical expression, in the church. Especially in this church, which as a cathedral should especially be like a foretaste of heaven. Those of us who have the privilege of being here week by week bear a special responsibility to make it that for those who visit, and for the diocese which we serve. If you are visiting, we hope that you are at home here, and that you know yourself loved.

In a few minutes, we will be sharing in the grace of God poured out for us again in communion. As we gather around the family table, at which we all have a place, Jesus will trust himself into our hands in bread and wine. Will you trust yourself into his? And know yourself at home with those who stand or kneel beside you?

John Witcombe