

AN EARTHLY HOME

Sermon at the Eucharist on Mothering Sunday

Readings: I Samuel 1.20-28; Colossians 3. 12-17; John 19. 25b-27.

YOU may feel that three familiar features are missing from this celebration of Mothering Sunday. The first is the daffodils. The second is the children – at any rate, the children of the Junior Church. And the third is a preacher who is also a mother. Let me offer some explanations.

First, the daffodils. In previous years, the team of Junior Church leaders, at (I have to say) great effort and some expense have prepared posies for each member of the congregation as well as those members of the general public who came especially to collect a posy and go home again. The absence of daffodils therefore depends on the second absent feature today: that of the Junior Church. We have made two attempts to resume Junior Church activities since the first lockdown. Leaders have spent time preparing materials, a rota covering all safeguarding requirements has been drawn up, families have been notified and encouraged, but so far we have not had viable numbers of children.

This of course is disappointing, and I hope the Junior Church may yet revive. But I don't think it's the failure that some people might suppose. The loss of a Junior Church or Sunday School might well be a grievous blow in a parish church; but it's always a mistake to see a cathedral through the lens of a parish church. A cathedral is so much more than what happens on a Sunday morning; and a cathedral's engagement with the young is so much more than what happens on a Sunday morning.

Let's briefly survey this Cathedral's engagement with the young. First, the Cathedral choirs (note the plural). More boy choristers in the Cathedral choir than for a number of years. A growing number of girl choristers. A newly-reformed voluntary choir of boys and girls singing at 6.30 on a Sunday evening, and bringing their families with them. (That is where you will get your daffodils today.) A wholly new youth choir of boy and girl teenagers. I dare to say that the health and vitality of our choirs is as strong today as at any time in the fifteen years I have been here; and its range and variety compares impressively with any other cathedral I know. And for the boys and girls of the different choirs, there is a weekly engagement with the canons of the

Cathedral who attempt to impart to the choristers some Christian formation, and struggle to answer their highly intelligent and penetrating questions.

Second, the King's School. School services and assemblies are held here several times a week. Oh, says the cynic, that doesn't count – they're expected to come. Well, they're not expected to come to the voluntary communion service each week in the crypt; nor are they compelled to have the Cathedral etched so affectionately into their minds and memories that in due time they ask to be married here - and married by their much-respected school chaplain. And this they do. They are certainly part of the Cathedral's engagement with the young.

And thirdly, our learning programme, focussed on, but not confined to, visiting school groups during termtime, and family activities during the holidays, and now based in our marvellous Undercroft. After two difficult years, this part of Cathedral life is growing apace; and this too is part of the Cathedral's engagement with the young. Much as we might wish to see the Junior Church revived, its absence must not distract us from the Cathedral's engagement with the young in so many other ways.

Now this is relevant to Mothering Sunday, because one of the mixtures of themes that led to the emergence of Mothering Sunday on this Fourth Sunday of Lent is that of the Church our Mother; and indeed of a cathedral as the Mother-church of its diocese. All the ways I have just described of the engagement of this Cathedral with the young is part of the cathedral's mothering of the community of the diocese.

But what about the preacher? Often in recent years the preacher has been themselves a mother, qualified to preach about mothering – both Georgina and Charmian have performed that ministry on several occasions. I'm not a mother; I cannot speak with the authority of being one; but I can speak of the experience that is common to us all – that of being mothered. We honour the singular beauty of motherhood this morning by honouring our own mothers. Some of you are here with your mother this morning; some of you will see your mother or speak to her today; some, like me, will not see our mothers until the Day of Resurrection, but we think of them, and pray for them, and Mothering Sunday is a day to thank God for them.

Jesus has a mother. That is part of the common humanity he shares with us; and the motherhood of Mary has been a strand of Christian thought and prayer from the very earliest centuries. The gospel reading today – suitable for Mothering Sunday, and suitable as we approach the season of Passiontide – marks the moment when the dying Jesus commended his mother to the care of the beloved disciple, and vice versa. Not

that the relationship between Jesus and his mother was straightforward. Much Christian piety down the centuries has simplified and sentimentalized that relationship. The gospels, on the other hand, make it plain that there were moments when the family of Jesus was seriously at odds with his controversial ministry and tried to drag him away from it. For anyone whose relationship with mother or father, son or daughter has been a complicated or difficult one, there is this to say: both Jesus and his mother understood that. When St Paul wrote to the Colossians, as we heard in the epistle, that they should ‘clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other’ – we may dare to think that that too may have been the experience of the Holy Family.

The glimpses that the gospels give us of the mother of Jesus suggest that had to learn a hard lesson of letting go. There was the episode of the boy Jesus in the Temple. There were the episodes of misunderstanding and disagreement in the course of his ministry. And finally there was the farewell at the foot of the Cross. Simeon had summed it up those thirty years ago when he said to Mary that a sword would pierce her heart.

But those gospel glimpses also show Jesus caring for his mother, not least at the moment of his death. He was concerned that she had a home to go to. And for all those who have reached the age when we are no longer cared for by our parents, but in turn have the duty of care for them, know that finding a home for them to go to is one of the most demanding, exhausting, and sometimes heartrending tasks that grown-up sons and daughters have to do.

The collect this morning spoke of Jesus ‘sharing he life of an earthly home’. One of the gospel-writers tells us that he was ‘obedient’ to his parents; but the Letter to the Hebrews says that he ‘*learned* obedience’ – which suggests that he found obedience no easier a thing than the rest of us. ‘Sharing the life of an earthly home’ is for most people the first experience of socialization, of relating to others, of loving and being loved, of learning to give as well as take. If we ever learn to do what St Paul urged the Colossians to do – to ‘bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other’ – then we are likely to have learned it first at home; and if not there, then how hard it is to learn it later and elsewhere. The ‘earthly home’ of Nazareth was that exacting school in which the Son of God learned obedience: an obedience that took him far from home and finally to his death. And yet – and we are about to trace out the story

of the passion once more in the weeks to come – even in the final act of obedience on the Cross, his dying thought was to provide a home for her who had first provided a home for him.

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