Sermon for Mothering Sunday 2021 (Zoom) by Revd Emma Phillips

First of all, I would like to say that all that I’m going to say today applies to fathers as well as mothers, so don’t switch off and count yourself out if you are a man! But as the Bible, and the church for that matter, are dominated by men, today’s the day for the women to get a look in! And I appreciate that Mothering Sunday did not originated as a day to thank God for our mothers, but it’s still an excellent thing to do!

Today I want to explore something more than gratitude. And I want to include more than biological mothering. All of us will have done some mothering, men included – caring practically for someone in need, listening sympathetically, providing a shoulder to cry on, nurturing, giving life to someone. I’d like to define mothering in the broadest terms as love which doesn’t demand anything in return and always looks to the day when it is no longer needed. It is a love that expects to let go, that rejoices in the independence of the loved one, a love that is not controlling nor manipulative. Of course, we all fall short of that love, but we recognise it when we see it, and we know that’s what we aspire to.

God loves us in these terms – indeed our love is only possible because God first loved us. The Bible does not have many references to God’s mothering, but when they come, they jump out at us – being written by men in a man’s world they are that much more dramatic and significant. So here are just three of them:

In Hosea chapter 11, God says “Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I who took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.” This tender imagery presents us with a God holding onto our toddler reins, keeping us from falling over or getting into danger, bending down to nurture us.

In Isaiah Chapter 49, God is compared to a mother with a child at her breast. He says “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

And Jesus refers to himself as a mother hen as he comes to Jerusalem just before his death: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Of course, God is not himself a mother – God is spirit, and does not have a gender, and is not a parent as we are. But the Bible tells us that humans are made in his image, male and females alike. The love of a mother is included in the Godhead, comes from the very nature of God. We are able to love in this way because God first loved us.

In Mary we see that love worked out in human form. We are reminded in today’s Gospel of Jesus’ presentation at the temple. With all the strange events of his birth fresh in Mary’s mind, she meets with Simeon. I can’t imagine that she was very glad to hear his words ‘a sword will pierce your own soul too’! It reminds me rather of the bad fairy’s curse at a princess’s christening! As a new mother, Mary must have wanted to wish those words unspoken, but she does not respond by silencing them. Later she is put to the test again as she and Joseph search for the twelve-year-old Jesus after he fails to travel home with them from Jerusalem – every mother’s nightmare! In John’s gospel we see her giving Jesus a push into his ministry at the wedding of Cana, but later on, Luke shows her with Jesus’ brothers trying to reclaim him when he is teaching. They could not reach him because of the crowd, but when Jesus is told that they want him, he does not jump to it and say ‘Coming, Mum!’ Instead he tell everyone standing there that ‘My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.’ Mary could easily have taken exception to this dismissal of her unique claim but she simply fades into the background after that, clearly present but just as one of the many women that follow Jesus. She lets him go – she does not demand to be the most important woman in his life, but that doesn’t change her feelings for him. She is still with him in those most awful moments when he is crucified, standing at the foot of the cross. She has to deal with the appalling agony of watching her son die a shameful, dreadful public death. She is among those who meet with him in the resurrection appearances, but she never gets to hold centre stage, although we are assured that Jesus continues to care deeply for her as he commits her to John even from his agony on the cross.

This is mothering at its most painful, mothering which comes with a huge cost. Maybe you have not experienced this degree of heartache, but many of you will have had times in your life when to love means letting go, allowing your friend or relative to go on without you – and not always in the direction you think would be best. You may, like Mary, have had to stand by while someone precious to you is in trouble, only able to witness their struggles or pain. On Mothering Sunday, it feels as though we should be concentrating on the joyful bits of motherhood, but for lots of people that just hides the pain. Mothering Sunday comes with reminders of the people we have lost, the children we didn’t have or the sadness of the children we still watch over, things we need to bring to God alongside the joy.

Our faith in God is not conditional on things coming out right. We don’t get an automatic pathway to happiness when we become Christians! Mary’s life would soon disabuse us of such a fiction! What we do have a God who chooses to come alongside us in the hard parts, who makes the most costly choice of all to enter human form and live amongst us. It might be so much easier if God took away our autonomy and fixed us all to be kind and holy all of the time – but where would the mothering be in all that? Love that is compelled is no love at all. When you think about it, God took an enormous risk in mothering us into being: he deliberately created humans who could, and did, reject him, in order that we might be able to turn to him willingly of our own accord. He holds us by training reins when we are little, or young in faith, but he lets go so that we might make our own choices – and he stands by us even when those choices really mess us up. When life becomes painful, we can know that his love is real by looking to the cross – the assurance that there is nowhere and nothing that he does not share with us.

Perhaps that is easier to bear when we are going through our own difficulties – we know that we can turn to Christ, even if it requires lots of trust to do so, or we can only do so for short moments. What may be harder is walking alongside the pain of a loved one, especially a loved one who does not know Jesus. We may be able to mother them in practical ways, but often we can only bear witness to their struggles, hold out our hands to assure them of our presence, carry them in our hearts. It feels painfully inadequate, and it is at these moments that we want to cry out to God ‘Why? Why don’t you do something?’ The Bible is full of these cries – we should never feel that it is rude or irreverent to yell at God in this way. He wants to hear the cries of our hearts – but he may just show us that his heart is breaking too! Though he will always give us hope at the end of the day, even if that hope is in heaven. God never gives up on us, though his time scale may quite different from ours.

Mothering does not mean fixing. There are times when God rescues us or our loved ones in response to our prayers, but plenty of other times when his response is to shows us how to go on loving ourselves, how to carry on in hope and faith without any dramatic solutions. If we let him, God can show us that he is with us and with those we love, no matter what.

Finally, one of the traditional meanings of Mothering Sunday is to celebrate our mother Church. This does not mean the building! We celebrate the fact that we are joined together into the body of Christ, one people in God. When we think about the sadnesses of our own experience of mothering, we are not alone. We can take our heartache to our church communities, our Christian friends, and share our needs for prayer. We are a network of praying people that stretches across the globe. Do not allow yourself to be cut off from that support, even if it just means reading a Christian book or watching a service on You Tube. God did not intend for any of us to walk alone.

Mothering is one of the most rewarding and fulfilling parts of our lives, whether it is biological or through the relationships that God has brought into our lives. God has given us not just a deep joy and responsibility as we mother other people, but he has made us part of his work. In that, we know that there will at times be a heavy cost to pay, but we also know that the love we offer is gathered into his eternal love, and none of it is wasted.