**
Numbers 21.4-9
John 3.14-21
14th March 2021 Mothering Sunday

 Look Up**

Mothering Sunday

One of the ideas behind Mothering Sunday is that of going back to Mother Church.

Of course, it is an idea that has, today, basically died out, yet historically people did visit what they considered to be their Mother Church on this, the fourth Sunday of Lent.

For Roman Catholics and Anglicans that might have meant making something of pilgrimage to your Cathedral, the mother church of the diocese. For Amersham dwellers today that would involve a visit to Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford for Anglicans, or Northampton Cathedral for Roman Catholics.

Yet, I suspect, for many others it meant returning to the church of their baptism, their home church. A time to reconnect with our roots and probably, in the process, visit some relatives and quite possibly our mother.

Over the past year Rachel has been investigating our family history and recently presented me with a wonderful wall chart mapping out the line of my eight great grandparents all the way back to 1610. She’s illustrated this with photographs of some of the churches where they were baptised. So, Southwalk Cathedral is there which was important to the London line of my family who were Watermen on the Thames at Bermondsey. And the lovely Sarratt Parish church is there, just down the road from here, because it is there that most of my Hertfordshire line were hatched, matched, and dispatched!

Places of belonging and feeling rooted, Mother Church, local church, church community and church family – all are important themes relevant on any Mothering Sunday.

Last year our first audio service was broadcast on Mothering Sunday 2020. It’s been just about a year now since some in the congregation have been inside AFC. Something we never imagined would have been our experience. And slowly, bit by bit, with no coercion, we are beginning to welcome back folk to our building with great joy.

When I was young and beginning to get a grip on some of the important things of life, I quickly came to the happy conclusion that my local church was one of the friendliest, most loving, and supportive places I could possibly be part of. Of course, it wasn’t perfect, but the love I found there was deep and genuine, and I have been permanently grateful for such a warm-hearted introduction to faith all my life since.

Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi, in a book we recently studied at AFC, talks a lot about marriage and family love as being a covenant, rather than a contract. A contract enables both parties to feel they will be treated fairly. A covenant may hope for that, but in the end, it will be more generous and self-giving. In a covenant of love, you might end up being the looser – but that’s fine, because love is always a covenant rather than a contract. Love seeks the wellbeing of ‘the other’ even at the expense of self. Mothers know that – the willingness to put their children first, even at the expense of themselves. It is good to remember that with thanksgiving on Mothering Sunday. And, to remember that fathers and friends do the same.

In the local church of my younger days we often talked of The Church Family, maybe not a phrase we hear so much today, perhaps preferring Church Community instead. Yet, at its best I believe the Church is a family. A family of love. A family in covenant with each other, walking at the speed of love and putting others before ourselves.

On a day such as this we give thanks for love and all the ways it comes into our lives through, mothers, fathers, family, friends, church, and community.

LOOK UP

Our Baptist Regional Minister, a one-time professional bassoonist with Opera North, describes music as ‘sticky’. That is, some pieces seem to go so deep into our souls that they stay with us forever and whenever we hear them, we are transported back in our mind’s eye to a place, time, or event when we first heard that song, hymn, or symphony.

A ’sticky piece’ for me is Bach’s St Matthew Passion. I sang it with the Malvern Festival Chorus, alongside 170 others, one Lent. I wasn’t much moved by it during the ten-week rehearsal period when, as usual, we practiced the individual choruses. However, come the final rehearsal on the afternoon before the performance, going from start to finish with orchestra and additional boys’ choir in attendance, I was blown away and found myself at times fighting back the tears because of the intensity and beauty of it all, not just the music but the joining up of the gospel story it told. One of my ‘sticky’ moments.

You’ll have your own, and at this time of year many of us love hearing once again the chorus, *God So Loved the World* from Stainer’s Crucifixion, a piece written so, the composer said, so that any church choir in the land could sing it. A piece first performed in 1887 at Marylebone Parish Church.

Well, those words, some of the best known amongst Christians, are found in today’s reading at John 3.16. *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall not die but have everlasting life.* That, at least, is the version I learnt in Sunday School.

We often think that little word ‘so’, God SO loved the world, defines the depth of God’s love for us. And that is surely a good thought and one that chimes with the overarching message of scripture.

However, in this instance, biblical linguists tell us, this little word so is not really about how much God loved the world but the WAY he loved the world.

Perhaps, then, we could paraphrase John 3 16 like this: *The way God loved our world was by generously giving us his Son.*

God loves by giving. It’s covenantal, sacrificial love. It’s at the heart of Bethlehem and Calvary and it stands front and centre in any faith that seeks to be Christian.

God came amongst us as a servant, in Jesus.

We are now in the month of March and on the 1st, St David’s Day, right on cue we had an internet card from one of our closest friends, who happens to be irrepressibly Welsh, containing her patron saint’s words from his final sermon: *Do the Little Things well.*

It’s good to be reminded of that in Lent. That a life of service can be expressed by the doing of many ‘little things’. A whole day can be full of small, yet meaningful acts of service done with a Christlike heart of generous love. And maybe, today, as we remember our mothers, perhaps such a description fits their life.

God loves us by giving and we are called to reflect that by loving others with the same generosity of spirit.

Now, I’m very conscious that in today’s passage John goes on to define God’s mission of love towards us as he writes that: *light has come into our world.*

It’s here that Advent meets Lent. For in the lead up to Christmas we often talk of God shinning his light amongst us. At the darkest time of year, we are reminded of a bright star and dazzling angels stunning the shepherds. Yet light has a part to play in our Easter journey too.

In some traditions the last services of Lent will be ones of Tenebrae as candles are extinguished so worshippers leave in darkness as our thoughts go to Good Friday and the snuffing out, as it were, of the light in the death of Jesus. And then on Easter Eve those same worshippers gather around a bonfire in the churchyard at midnight anticipating the resurrection and the dawning of the light once more on Easter Sunday morning.

Maybe one definition of what it means to be Christian is to be someone who, in the words of a hymn we often sing is to be a person *Longing for Light…*I think it’s important to say that because John has this take on the ministry of Jesus and the activity of God. This divine mission, which so much reflects the divine character, is not disapprovingly judgemental towards us, but life enhancing. These are the words immediately after John 3.16: *It was not to judge the world that God sent his Son into the world, but that through him the world might be saved.*
This is the God who offers the world eternal and abundant life.

This morning’s reading from the Jewish scriptures is directly referred to at the beginning of today’s passage from John. It’s that intriguing and, to our ears, inexplicable story of the Israelites, just out of Egypt and in something of a rebellious mood, suffering an infestation of snakes. This painful episode on their wilderness journey filled them with remorse and so Moses was commanded to make a pole with a brass serpent fixed upon it and if those who had been bitten looked up, so the story goes, they would live and be saved.

All very similar to a later Greek myth from the 5th Century BC and the rod of Asklepios that, just like the bible story is a pole with a snake entwined, and something that became a symbol of healing, used today in the logos of both the BMA and the World Health Organisation.

John writes: *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up…*

And, what, I wonder is the connection?

Certainly, both are connected with a certain sense of healing. In the wilderness it was physical, at the cross it is total: body, mind, and spirit.

Yet, isn’t there another, vital connection? In the wilderness those who were suffering knew their need and, in their vulnerability, looked up to Moses’ staff.

So, what of us as we walk through Lent and approach the cross of Jesus? What does the cross mean to me?

Maybe the marriage of this Old Testament story with the New Testament cross reminds us that in both the pre-requisite to looking up is us acknowledging our vulnerability, our fragility and our need for healing and the touch of God’s grace.

The Israelites looked at the pole and serpent and were healed, we look upon the cross and, in that moment, we meet God’s love and light and our lives too can be healed and made whole.

Traditionally Lent is not thought of as the most joyful of times. In medieval days it was a season of penance that one struggled through before the feasting of Easter.

Yet, at least in the northern hemisphere, Lent occurs as the days are lengthening and the light is building and blessing more of our day, bringing renewal. We are, both physically and, pray God, spiritually, walking towards the light, the gift of light of which John speaks here in his gospel.

This can be a truly hope-filled season, if only we will look up.

May it be so, in the name of God, whose generous love offers us the gift of Jesus and whose Spirit breathes love and light into our Lenten journey. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 4th March 2021.*