

*Today, we have reached another milestone in the year.* This fourth Sunday of Lent comes half-way through the austere season leading up to Easter, better known by us as Mothering Sunday. [Under the provisions of the Book of Common Prayer the Gospel reading for today is John 6.1-14 which is the parable of Jesus feeding the 5000 so that gives us another name for this Sunday - Refreshment Sunday which in earlier times was observed by some relaxation of the Lenten strictness and in Medieval times, special fruitcakes known as Simnel cake were consumed. Now I'm not going to go into the history of Simnel cakes, as you all sit there thinking, but that's the cake we eat at Easter, because, spoiler alert, there is a feature about them in our Parish Newsletter due out very soon.]

Like many festivals its history is not clear and may refer to a converging of two customs - firstly and dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the one day of the year servants were given off to return to their home churches (usually where they had been baptised) which they would attend with their families. In journeying there, usually on foot, they would gather the flowers that were out and, in the hedgerows, to gift to their mothers. This 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent has also been known as Refreshment Sunday because of the readings prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer for today – the collect, Epistle from Galatians 4 and the Gospel from chapter 6 of John recall the refreshment of worn human nature, with Paul's description of Jerusalem "which is the mother of us all" and the gospel account of Jesus feeding the 5000

Our Old Testament and Gospel lectionary readings this morning lean into our theme as we will now see.

Firstly, in the reading from the first book of Samuel, we have heard about Hannah bringing her first born child, Samuel to the temple where he is to be dedicated to the service of God and will spend his life. The child has been named Samuel, meaning 'Name of God' or 'God has heard'. If you read the first part of the chapter you will know that Hannah had spent many years praying for a child and it was with bitter tears that she had promised God that if he would just grant her a son she would dedicate his life to God: "In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly. And she made a vow, saying, "LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life" And so Hannah arriving at the temple "the house of the Lord at Shiloh" is fulfilling that vow.

Hannah's prayer in the next chapter will be a foreshadowing of the Magnificat, the great prayer of Mary following the annunciation or announcement to her by the Angel Gabriel that she is favoured in the eyes of God, and that, as a consequence, she will have a son, Jesus, who will be the long-promised Messiah.

Hannah and Mary's common blessing, their divinely ordained motherhood, and their shared inspiration, the Holy Spirit, explain the parallels of their prayerful verses and prophetic utterances.

Many women will relate to Hannah praying with bitter tears as they struggle with conception.

As mothers love and care for their children so, over the years, that love is reciprocated and with the passage of time, there may well be a role reversal so that children will be caring for mothers, and their parents as their health declines. And it will not be unusual to find yourself looking in both directions simultaneously – having responsibility for young children and also for aging parents. And neither role is easy: as I overheard a woman across the road yesterday, holding a loud conversation on her mobile say: "my dot dot dot parents are a total nightmare", and that's the sanitised version of what she said! Oh dear, I thought! Our closest relationships in action can be fraught with tensions and complexities; it's not all angelic choirs and high-flown phrases. At what point do we go from being strong, resolute, independent and resourceful to stubborn, unrealistic and unreasonable.

Turning to our Gospel reading we see that even as Jesus hung on the cross some of his final thoughts were concerned to ensure that his mother was not left alone following his death and commends Mary into the care of his beloved disciple.

Touching and profound as that moment on the cross is, Christ's love goes much further than love for his mother and, as Christians, we should not forget that our call to be persons of love is much more

radical than just loving our immediate family. In our reading from Colossians, we are told that as God's chosen ones we should "*clothe ourselves in love*" and elsewhere we are told to "*love our neighbours as ourselves*" and we know from the parables that our neighbour is not limited to the strict understanding of the word but extends to those we may not like and those who are profoundly different from ourselves. Jesus demonstrated and showed the depth of God's love for us but he was but clear and unequivocal in his teaching: "Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live" . Jesus reserved his wrath for those who made an outward show of their religious observances but were inwardly unchanged as represented by the pharisees and scribes.

What is interesting about both Hannah and Mary is their inner strength and faith in God. This enables them to let go of their sons, to step away from them so that they can fulfil their vocations. The callings of both Samuel and Jesus were exceptional but it is also a fact that one of the most difficult aspects of parenting is understanding the importance of letting our children go, standing back and observing the painful steps they have to make to navigate the world and to flourish in their own right. As we start walking, we fall over, scrape our knees and sometimes noses but we continue to do the same in the metaphorical sense throughout our lives, even as adults as we pitch ourselves forward into new situations and some of us are more confident about doing that than others. Hannah and Mary's faith in God enabled them to believe in the roles their sons must play, even if they did not and could not comprehend what God had in store for them.

I would like to suggest that what we hear in these readings is not about the particular future of these two children and the cost to their particular mothers, but is something much more profound about the complexity of family life and the sacrifices parents are asked to make to allow their children to be who they are meant to be, to follow God's call in their lives.

As Christians, we believe that we are all uniquely made in the image of God. That we are called to follow in Jesus' footsteps in our own particular and unique way. Yet, also, we are all born from a mother, who in most cases nurtures us through our childhood. And even if not, we still receive the gift of life through the person who nurtured us for nine months in her womb.

Just as in our readings, in our daily lives, we can sometimes feel a conflict between the two. The nurture of children, providing them with a safe and loving environment, and yet giving them the freedom they need to grow up to be loving and whole people in their own right.

For all of us, being children ourselves, children of our parents and children of our heavenly Father, these questions are real too. What are we meant to be doing, and who are we meant to be?

Some people give up work to look after disabled children or elderly parents, and they will have asked themselves what the right decision was: to serve their parents or children by caring for them, or to serve others through the work they did. Those questions don't have easy answers, and it is important to remember too that the answers will be different for different people at different times and stages in life.

The season of Lent is a time in which we can particularly reflect on these questions: are we doing what we are meant to be doing, and are we trying to be truthful to who we are and in our relationship with God and others? This fourth Sunday of Lent, the half-way point, Mothering Sunday, is the day in which the gravity that can come with this reflection can be momentarily lifted as we give thanks for what we have been given, particularly by those who have borne and nurtured us.

Because no matter our individual paths and vocations, we are all called to be thankful. In our collect last week, we prayed that we may find the way of the cross 'none other than life and peace'. May we find the same to be true about our paths in life: not always easy, often complicated, but we can be reassured by the fact that God is in there with us. Jesus walked the way of the cross before us, and he will walk with us, no matter where we go. Amen