

Sunday 10th March 2024; Mothering Sunday

Benefice Holy Communion Ampleforth

We come today to Mothering Sunday. When we mark this festival, we follow centuries of tradition, dating back to pagan times, when it was originally held in honour of the mother goddess, Cybele. On his conversion to Christianity, the Roman emperor Constantine encouraged its adoption as an occasion to honour the Virgin Mary and Mother Church. In England, the day was marked for several centuries, but by the mid-20th century the custom had almost died out. However, the arrival of American troops during WW2 triggered a revival and, as it became more widely used, the date of Mothering Sunday was set as the 4th Sunday in Lent, not a commercial event, but a lovely and thought-provoking Sunday in the middle of our Lent austerities. It is mothering - the act of nurturing, caring, and loving - that is at the heart of Mothering Sunday. Its name derives from two traditions; firstly, in the Middle Ages this Sunday in Lent was the one when people returned to their “mother” church, the place of their baptism, for a special service, and secondly (and much later) this was the day when people in domestic service were allowed home to visit parents and family. In both cases, people went “a-mothering”. This term, derived from the verb “to mother” of implies a very wide focus that includes everyone who nurtures, cherishes, and cares, whatever may be their gender or their biological connection with those for whom they care.

Reading the words from St. John’s Gospel, it’s impossible to imagine Mary’s anguish as she watched her son’s life slipping away. We know now that, as the pain she experienced at his birth created hope for the world, so the pain experienced at his death was bringing salvation to the

world. Mary didn't know that then; nor was she probably able to recognise in her pain the extent of her son's continued "mothering" of her. In the midst of his agony, he cared enough to hand her into the care of the disciple he loved, John. This is a profound moment; two people who loved Jesus, who knew him to be God's Son and who believed in his mission, were united in grief at the foot of the cross as they watched him die. As Jesus entrusted them to each other, with the words to Mary "Woman here is your son" and to John, "Here is your mother", he established a new family. Mary and John formed a nurturing relationship with each other; they strengthened each other, offered mutual comfort, care, love and support and shared hospitality and encouragement with others. Out of this grew the church, mother church, and these qualities given by Jesus, comfort, care, compassion should still be the hall marks of what the church should be and how those who claim to belong to it should behave and live. Those words of Jesus to John, still resonate with us in honouring all mothers and families, but also honouring our mother church.

Above all the one word that sums up this care, love and nurturing is compassion. The word "compassion" in Hebrew is *rakhum*, and it is related to the word "womb," or *rekhem*. The word itself conveys the emotion and nurture that a mother has for her vulnerable child. This relationship to the word womb also gives us a sense that compassion originates in the core of a person—a gut instinct or something that you feel in your inner being, a God given gift of motherliness inside us all.

In his letter to the Colossians St. Paul continues to describe what this should look like by saying 'you are God's chosen people, you are God's holy people, you are God's beloved people.' So, we are to recognize who we are

and recognize what God has done for us, which is part of the self-examination theme the season of Lent offers us.

So, on this another Mothering Sunday, let us be reminded who we are, St. Paul says that we are God's chosen people, His children, nurtured and cared for as a mother for her child, holy and beloved and that we must never forget.

Thanks be to God. Amen.