

Sunday 15th March 2026; 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. No doubt the words of Simeon at the Presentation

of Jesus at the Temple would come back to her,” and a sword will pierce your heart also.” 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, that in the words of the famous song, “Mary did you know”, the baby boy she delivered would one day deliver her, and us all. During his agony, he cared enough to hand her into the care of the disciple he loved. This is a profound moment; two people who loved Jesus, who knew him to be God’s Son, were united in grief at the foot of the cross as they watched him die. As Jesus entrusted them to each other, he established a new family. From that moment, 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.

Above all the one word that sums up this care, love and nurturing is compassion. The word "compassionate" is derived from the Latin means "to suffer with." In the Bible, it refers to a deep empathy and concern for the suffering of others, coupled with a desire to alleviate that suffering. This quality is often associated with God’s nature and is seen as a call for His followers to exhibit the same attitude. In biblical times, compassion was not merely an emotional response but a call to action. The Jewish culture emphasized community and responsibility toward one another. Acts of compassion were seen as vital expressions of one's faith and relationship with God and is described in the word “compassion” in Hebrew; *rakhum*, which 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 for womb also gives us a sense that compassion originates in the core of a person—an instinct 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 saying ‘you are God’s chosen people, holy people, beloved people.’

So, as we continue through Lent on this Mothering Sunday, let us be reminded of this; we are God’s chosen people, His children, nurtured and cared for as a mother for her child, holy and beloved. We must treat one another in the same way and let us ask ourselves a question, ‘Are we prepared to stand at the foot of the cross and receive the gaze of Jesus who looks down with love and compassion and turn to one another and fulfil His request to be His family and let Him rule in our hearts?’

Thanks be to God. Amen.