

Sermon at Brecon Cathedral

Sunday 15 March 2014 at 11.00am

Mothering Sunday (Lent 4)

1 Samuel 1.20-28 / Col. 3. 12-17 / John 19. 25-27

The Very Revd Dr Paul Shackerley

Dean of Brecon

I remember listening to a powerful sermon on Mothering Sunday in 2010 given by a lay woman who was a midwife. She said that today 'midwifery is a privileged, oppressed and challenging profession. She quoted a midwife, Nicky Leap, who wrote brilliantly about the relationship between midwife and mother as 'embracing uncertainty together'. She said, 'a mother's questions about her pregnancy are the beginning of a process of grappling with uncertainty and decision making that will persist through the experience of raising a child.' Rachel's experience as a midwife, is that trust is at the heart of this challenging profession.' She also ended her sermon on a political note, after talking of a mother who was poor and about to give birth, that political parties must acknowledge the shortage of midwives when birthrates are rising, and that midwives experiencing pressures become ill and exhausted, placing further pressures on their profession.

A report written in 2013 by the ecumenical churches of Scotland called *The Lies We Tell Ourselves: Ending Comfortable Myths about Poverty*, outlined a number of myths relating to poverty. The report observed that many believe that the poor is a distinct group of people deserving of their poverty, and therefore deserving of the deprivations brought about by governmental cuts in benefits. Embedded in the report was a negative language about mothers who sit uncomfortably with a mothers' day service and posies of flowers. We may wonder why.

Well, the challenges facing many mothers living in poverty and struggling, are largely hidden from our view. Our comfortable myths supported by the media is that poor mothers are: 'teenage pregnancies', 'single mothers', 'living off benefits', those who 'struggle with addiction', those 'unable to manage their money' or those who are 'just plain lazy'. In other words, being a working mum, juggling school-runs, nursery drop-offs, church commitments, home life and feeding their children with little or no money make these mothers absent or negligent. Add to the mix the mothers who go hungry in order to feed their children in Britain today, and we see how the image of mother is being worked out in a new generation of young women who struggle and have to use food banks to feed their children. The commercial world doesn't take account of these complexities when we pamper mothers with breakfast in bed, lunches, flowers, chocolates and other treats. These symbols and gestures are to be received

with thanks, of course, to thank mothers in families that are stable. Yet, it adds pressure and expectations of maternal love on mothers who are broken and struggling. Whoever our mothers are for us, their presence or absence impact upon us. Perhaps the Scriptures and this Mother Cathedral Church for some, can offer consolation and an alternative understanding of nurture that is offered by the commercial and secular society.

The record of mothers in the Old Testament illustrates commitment to God in brokenness, and tenderness to the gifts of children that are given to us. The stories of mothers in the Bible have something in common. Sarah was unable to have children. Rachel was unable to have children. Ruth was unable to have children. Hannah in today's reading, was unable to have children. Elizabeth who could not have children and then Mary, who even though her condition was different, was stigmatized as a single mother. These Biblical women could not have children. Yet, God performed the miracle of birth for them all. Sarah gave birth to Isaac, one of the patriarchs of the faith. Rachel gave birth to Joseph, who transformed a nation. Ruth gave birth to Obed, the grandfather of King David. Hannah gave birth to Samuel, called by God at a young age to be a Prophet. Elizabeth gave birth to John the Baptist, the forerunner who prepared the way for Jesus. Mary gave birth to Jesus Christ. It's quite incredible that the greatest men in biblical history were born out of a miraculous work of God in a most intimate way through the brokenness of their mothers, who were committed to worship and prayed daily.

We are able to make connections with these biblical mothers who lived with brokenness and hope. Parents expect to outlive their children, no matter what age. Priests encounter the silent grief of a mother when her child dies. We cannot begin to understand how the mothers of the British teenagers Shamima, Amira and Kadiza, are feeling after their flight to the dangers of Syria. Or the parents of Alesha, Rhodri and Corey as they live with the grief and shock of the sudden death of their children, along with the sons and grandchildren of Margaret, who also died recently a recent tragic accident near Brecon.

God wants us to bring our brokenness to him. God can cope with our brokenness and anxieties. God's love motivates, inspires and enables us all to offer acts of tenderness and compassion; such love gives us direction and parameters within which human lives can flourish. God shows motherly affection in meeting us in the darkest places of our lives. God meets us with compassion and mercy, as he did with Hannah and Elkanah.

Mothering Sunday is a time for the worship of God in our mother churches. Each year is a time to challenge our assumptions about gender, marital status of women, and the secular sentimentality of cards and flowers that keep Clinton's in business. The mother church is a

place where we bring our brokenness and imitate the nurturing motherly love of God. Here, our vision of mothering is expanded beyond the limitations of human experiences of mothers, with all its secular sentimentalities. Today, we know, will be a painful day for those who have lost their mothers, or mothers who have lost their children. Today is a time of remembrance for them too.

The Cathedral mother church is not a building alone, but a network of faithful, fragile relationships. At the end of this service, some may wish to receive gifts of flowers; offered as a sign of beauty, life, gratitude and creation. They are offered and received as a sign of our nurturing care for each other, regardless of gender and status. The Church as mother is us: teaching and supporting, protecting and caring. Rooted in the love of God expressed in Jesus Christ, and welling up in us by the power of his Spirit.

That great anchoress Julian of Norwich was advanced beyond her years. Some describe her a proto-universalist. She saw no wrath in God, only mercy. Writing in the 14th Century in a time of turmoil. Her prayer to God as both Mother and Father:

Thus our mother, Christ, in whom our parts are kept un-separated, works in us in various ways. For in our mother, Christ, we profit and increase, and in mercy he reforms and restores us, and by virtue of his passion, death and resurrection joins us to his substance. This is how our mother, Christ, works in mercy in all his beloved children.

(Julian of Norwich)

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