



Mothering Sunday Sermon, 22nd March 2020

Preached at Peterborough Cathedral by Canon Sarah Brown, Canon Missioner

Today we are celebrating a day that the world calls Mother's Day and the church calls Mothering Sunday. Mother's day is a time when we remember to be particularly nice to Mum. As a mum I certainly have never objected to such flourishes of affection - although the tea in bed lovingly made for me by my 3 year old with cold water from the tap and served with great fanfare and excitement at 6am was truly revolting - yet also strangely adorable. It's strange, but if my husband woke me up at 6.00am shrieking out *London's Burning* in my ear on a plastic recorder before serving me cold tea, I would react quite differently - so fickle is human love. But I hope that all Mothers out there have had some heartwarming contact and know themselves to be loved. It's important, more now than ever.

Mother's Day is good stuff for many but hard for others. Not only are there many today who are isolated from their mothers but not everyone has a mother they can celebrate. If you had a mother unable to do the things mothers are meant to do, then Mother's Day is tough. If you have lost your mother, or never knew her, then today is painful. But Mothering Sunday goes deeper. It takes us beyond the celebration or regret of individuals and points to the joy and difficulty of human love and the call to love as God loves. It is an exploration of the love of God in the face of the human condition. At a time when the human condition is being rather clearly brought home to us, Mothering Sunday offers insight.

The words of a 1987 hit by rock group Heart come to mind. It is called *Who will you run to?* The chorus goes like this - I'm not going to sing it or play air guitar - I have no desire to become an internet sensation for all the wrong reasons:

Who will you run to when it all falls down?
Who's gonna pick your world up off the ground?
Who's gonna take away the tears you cry?
Who's gonna love you baby, as good as I?

Who will you run to? Will you turn to your own strength, fearfully hoarding stuff out of fear?
Will you turn to the Church as you have known it and find it missing so lose your faith, or
will you run to the Lord and know yourself protected under the shadow of his wings?

I have always read the Exodus passage about Moses's mother, desperately putting her son into God's hands to save his life, as a mother. How hard pressed she must have been to have parted with her son in such a dangerous and uncertain way. Hoping and praying that he would be alright, alone in a dangerous world of murdering Egyptians, river currents and crocodiles. How fiercely she must have loved her child and agonized over the options to take that risk! Today I read it also as a leader of the Church whose ministry has been to nurture, love and teach all its children, now forced for all our protection to set everyone afloat in unpredictable waters, away from the physical centres of nurture and support and all the churchy beauty that we cherish, to go and be Christians dispersed.

How I and my colleagues would love to have you sitting here with us today. We pray that the basket of faith that we have helped weave and tar with you over the years will float; that God will carry you and protect you and strengthen your faith so that you can do his work in whatever way he calls you to. Look out for burning bushes and signs of his grace. Keep Holy Week and Easter with us online and let us know how he is working in your lives while we cannot be together in person.

As children set afloat on a river of uncertainty we need to learn how to be the body of Christ, the living stones without our physical certainties. Our spiritual certainties remain - Christ, the cross, the resurrection and we need to pray and have confidence in God that he will continue to build his Church even if our preferred, familiar model of it is out of action for a while. The maternal apron strings are untied if not permanently cut. Mother Church - this cathedral - is still here as it has been for 900 years, sad but still worshipping, still hoping and praying; suffering and loving with all God's people. But her children are out in the world beyond her immediate loving and ability to nurture. Some of you may fall agonizingly away, lost without the physical church, and we may lose you from the family of faith. Please stay! In these circumstances we are finally flung into the position of having to be willing and able to rely, not on beautiful buildings and vicars and structures, but on God Himself and on the love of God's scattered people communicated in new ways. It hurts like hell but it is probably good for us.

Jesus' words in the gospel sum up the heartache and pain of love without control. "O Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood together under her wings, and you were not willing!"

These are words of such sadness. Jesus laments that the people of Jerusalem are like chicks that refuse to be cared for, looked after or protected. "You were not willing."

Knowing what it's like to love someone who doesn't want protection. Knowing the pain that comes in realizing that you can't save them, you can't make them change, you can't make them choose a different path and yet still always keeping the wings open offering shelter and protection. This is our God.

The world turns us away from that which is good and eternal and pulls us in the direction of those things that satisfy now but do not last. And yet we can and must now choose to run under his wings as a child runs to a parent for comfort. The mother hen image speaks to us of fragile, vulnerable human beings who face real danger. I would love to say that the Mother Hen God will protect us from Corvid 19, but I can't. A mother hen cannot actually keep a determined fox from killing her chicks. Danger is real, so what good is running to God if it can't keep us safe?

Running to God doesn't keep foxes or viruses from being dangerous but it keeps them from being what determines how we experience life and offers real comfort. This virus is not optional, but fear is and the antidote to fear is love. Our invitation as people of faith is to run to Christ who loves us and respond to danger by loving as he loves. It is to Christ that we must turn and in Christ we must remain because his perfect love casts out fear.

Who will you run to? Our God is the God of Comfort. We suffer with Christ and we find our comfort in and through him. Suffering is part of the journey but resurrection follows. If we run to God in our tears and our fears when our world falls down, he is with us, for nobody loves us as good as him. So pray, read your bibles, discuss and support each other remotely. Cancel fear by acting in love, keep giving, keep loving and sharing. But do it from home for now.