

1 Samuel 1.20-28

So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel,²⁰ saying, "Because I asked the LORD for him."²¹ When her husband Elkanah went up with all his family to offer the annual sacrifice to the LORD and to fulfil his vow,²² Hannah did not go. She said to her husband, "After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the LORD, and he will live there always."²³

²³ "Do what seems best to you," her husband Elkanah told her. "Stay here until you have weaned him; only may the LORD make good his²⁴ word." So the woman stayed at home and nursed her son until she had weaned him.

²⁴ After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was, along with a three-year-old bull,²⁵ an ephah²⁶ of flour and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh. ²⁵ When the bull had been sacrificed, they brought the boy to Eli, ²⁶ and she said to him, "Pardon me, my lord. As surely as you live, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the LORD. ²⁷ I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. ²⁸ So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD." And he worshiped the LORD there.

Colossians 3.12-17

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

John 19.25-27

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman,²⁷ here is your son," ²⁷ and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

Mothering Sunday began during the middle ages not as a day to celebrate mothers, but as a day to return to your mother church – the one in which you were baptised, or where you grew up.

Sarah has recently read a book set in Mediaeval England, and pointed out that with roads as bad as they were, it was impossible to go and visit people throughout autumn and winter because it simply took so long – if you had a horse or carriage at your disposal at all. So spring might give you the first chance to meet up with people, to return to your mother church (which still might be relatively local) and catch up.

It was only later that the idea of mothering expanded to include motherhood generally, the motherhood of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and perhaps even thoughts of mother earth, as spring began to show life again.

As such, though other significances accrued, Mothering Sunday is actually about community – where are we from, and where do we belong?

There can be issues when we talk about Mothering Sunday in other ways too. When we celebrate mothers there are various 'whatabouteries' that come to mind. What about fathers? What about those who remain childless, whether that was deliberate, or because they couldn't have children?

What about those who never got married, or haven't yet? What about stepmothers? What about those relationships that were poor — not all mothers have been saints. And so on.

The readings today give us some biblical mothers — Hannah, whose barrenness was healed in answer to prayer, Mary, who stood at the foot of the cross while her son was crucified. They give us examples of nurture, self-giving, devotion, and the way a mother lives the joys but also the sufferings of her children.

Elsewhere, while the Bible refers to God more in terms of fatherhood, and Jesus was male, we see female and mother imagery and metaphors for God too, and the virtues Jesus embodied are equally as relevant to women as men. Women — mothers — need no less courage, nor love, nor faithfulness nor any other virtue than men do to live as God intends.

But this matters less if on Mothering Sunday we focus on community. God commands us to love him, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Jesus urges us to love one another as he has loved us. Each of these commands tells us to turn our attention away from self onto the needs of others. The passage from Colossians tells us how to do this community living well:

'Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.' This is not merely how to be nice, it is how to live in community well.

To Paul, who wrote this letter, living well in community was essential to our expression of Christian faith. In our day we have notions of having our 'own private faith'. To Paul, this would seem nonsensical — faith changes who you are; who you are means how you interact with others. It should be completely obvious that your encounter with the goodness of God has shaped you for the good.

In my Lent course I have been trying to touch upon a number of the key areas that theology focuses its thought on. One of these is God as trinity — God is one, and yet three persons. God wants us to know him. But knowing God, it turns out that God is already the perfect role model for how we should live. You see, there may be three persons — Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or, if you prefer, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer — but each is one in thought, and love and action with the others. If God is trinity, God can love God and it genuinely is that sort of love that grows by always looking to the other, and not to oneself. The Father loves the Son and the Spirit; Son loves Father and Spirit; Spirit loves Father and Son — and each person of God loves you, and wants to be as close to you as each is to each other.

This is, of course, somewhat of an ideal. We live in the real world, and have to bear with one another. In Paul's time, no less than ours, there were people in the church community, or any community, that can get up our noses. What then?

I think it's worth remembering that even monks and nuns, living in close community, have to learn to tolerate each other. Even they are not so holy and good that they don't find some people easy to get on with, and others very difficult. But, as a rule, they understand that this is what it takes, and it is up to them to deal with their own reactions.

We can all go a long way towards living peaceably in community by being deliberate in loving, deliberate in forgiveness, deliberate in remembering that other people are *not* like you, and you shouldn't expect them to be.

We can go further with positive action. Struggling with someone? Go out of your way to make them feel your love, they may well respond with love in return.

If you hear others complaining about someone, don't join in, but advocate for the person who is not there to defend themselves — use your imagination to think of all the real reasons they acted as they did, or they are the way they are. Now do it when *you're* the one taking swings at someone who is not there.

I heard a story of a churchwarden who told his bishop how intolerable his priest was. Or it could have been the other way round. The bishop didn't promise to sort out the problem. He suggested, 'Why don't you pray for them, every day, for the next two years, and then come back to me.'

I don't think he was fobbing off a problem. I think he was right that prayer is at the heart of our doing community well – in prayer we consider the wants and needs and situation of other people. We train ourselves to love as Jesus loves. Prayer is a great expression of our love – we can be bothered to tell God about other people, not just ourselves.

In that, perhaps, the most important thing about Mothering Sunday is remembering that love and prayer go hand in hand – be it in the love of mothers, or the love of a community that knows itself through its relationship with a mother church, and with its Lord.

Let's pray.

Father God, we thank you for our mothers, and for all mothers, and their ceaseless care and hard work. We thank you for our church communities – the ones we are part of and the ones that shaped us. Help us to nurture loving community well, that many more might find faith through the love of such a community as this. Amen.

SDG.