

Mothering Sunday 2022

I have 4 Mums, don't you?

My own Mum lives in Eastbourne, 92 years young, and sadly you haven't met her yet! She still drives, which is a bit of a worry, and still bakes amazing cakes for many churches and charities. Like you, she is in Church this morning because she knows that every Sunday is a day of thanksgiving. Inevitably, it will be a time to reflect on her mum too, my grandma, who came from a very poor, Irish family – one of some 11 children, I think, and with no birth certificates!

It is so important to remember and pray for those closest and dearest we have lost, but whose influence and love still shapes our own. And, of course, for those whose family memories are a cause of sorrow or pain, today is emotionally or spiritually, very difficult. Today's Gospel, though, still speaks to all of us.

In a quite different context, concerning the plight of Ukrainian women and children seeking shelter and protection and new homes, however temporary, I was cheered to hear of those women in our churches who have told their offspring to forgo the chocolates or flowers this year and instead send more practical aid. I was cheered to learn locally that St John's in Woodbridge have over 40 congregational applications in already to open up their own homes despite the shared frustration of all the bureaucratic delays. And as you can imagine, there are all kinds of obstacles and challenges ahead not least regarding language, transport, schooling, and dealing with the trauma they bring with them. Today's Gospel though still speaks through all of us.

Now our second mum is 'Mother Church' – from which today's special Sunday originates. Since the 16th century today was an explicitly religious event. It became a tradition that, on the 4th Sunday of Lent, people would return to their main home church or cathedral for a special service. This pilgrimage was apparently known as "going

a mothering”, and became something of a holiday event with domestic servants traditionally given the day off to visit their own families as well with their gifts of simnel cake perhaps. Ok, it is a given that the commercialisation and secularity of today’s age has trumped that of a more religious context, but has it?

It is surely a strong message to say that St Mary’s serves the whole parish and not just its own members? That what we learn and nurture and explore here ‘inside’ affects how we serve and care for others ‘out’ there in the Thoroughfare, the places of work and leisure with whom we share the trials and joys of Christian living. This is why so many different kinds of chaplaincy have been formed and encouraged - to supplement the work and mission of our churches. One statistic which came my way last week said that most Christians come to faith before the age of 19, but 0-16 is the fastest declining demographic in the church today. And research shows that our younger generation up until the age of 18 will spend roughly 35,000 hours on screens. And those of you who heard the wise and resourceful chaplain of Felixstowe School recently, were reminded of how engaged and worried so many students are about the kind of world we have created, not least how we have exploited or ignored the weakest and most vulnerable. Or how today, Churches are giving such a mixed message about human sexuality when the Gospel is so pointedly inclusive and liberating. They would say that ‘throwing stones’ is not the mission of the Church, anywhere. They’re right!

And so our third Mum, whom we shall sing about in our final hymn: ‘Mother Earth’. Again, care and protection, not their opposite, are the key for the future of our planet. Next weekend here in Woodbridge, there are a plethora of experts speaking on climate change and much more – practical as well as theoretical. Our old friend, Lord Deben is a keynote speaker on Saturday morning and it is vital that the voice of ‘Mother Church’ is there too, so please pop in

and take part. Together, we have much to offer this forum, and even more still to do.

Our 4th Mum is the One to whom this beautiful Church is dedicated, a Lady with so many titles, that we can easily forget her ordinariness, her everyday appeal to hold up for us all the gift of Jesus: when we are not looking for Him; when He seeks us. Soon we will be able to light our own candles and prayers around the one who prays for us so constantly, and fearlessly: Mary, the Mother of Our Lord. She had to do what the disciples of Jesus just could not face: to be there at the foot of the Cross and see the goodness, sanctity and resolve of her dying Son: who would become 'Salvator Mundi', Saviour of the World, and 'Prince of Peace.'

I have chosen a poem excerpt to end, which you can revisit here by our beautiful statue or revisit on our church website, where every sermon is now, worryingly, part of the World Wide Web! The poet is Gerald Manley Hopkins and the title is intriguing: "The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe." It says more profoundly than I can how and why we cherish the universal motherhood and grace of Mary. And most of all, how blessed we are to be adopted as part of her extended, living and breathing, holy family:

"Be Thou then O thou dear
Mother, my atmosphere;
My happier world, wherein
To wend and meet no sin;
Above me, round me lie
Fronting my froward eye
With sweet and scarless sky;
Stir in my ears, speak there
Of God's love, O live air,
Of patience, penance, prayer:
World-mothering air, air wild,
Wound with thee, in thee isled,
Fold home, fast fold thy child."

Amen.

