

## **FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT – MOTHERING SUNDAY – 19 March 2023**

**Exodus 2. 1-10**

**(Colossians 3. 12-17)**

**Luke 2.33-35**

Today is Mothering Sunday, apart from being the fourth Sunday in Lent, and is therefore a day of contrasts. This is partly why I have chosen today to talk about a topic which preoccupies many people and must have occurred to almost everyone including me: the topic is “I am sceptical about humanity being made in God’s loving image when it seems people are so cruel, in particular to their own children”, as we have seen and heard recently.

The pictures we are presented with in the OT and Gospel readings are pictures of motherly love and devotion. They remind us of the lengths to which mothers will go, against all odds, to protect their children – even to the extent of endangering their own lives. This self-effacing love is a cause for celebration and one which resonates with all of us, because it makes us proud of the good things humanity is capable of, and also reminds us of the love of our own mothers, and also of other people who may have acted as mothers to us.

On the other hand we are in Lent, when the mood is still somewhat sombre with thoughts of repentance and determination to do better in our relationship with God and his son Jesus Christ.

The love which we read about in the story of the birth of Moses in the book of Exodus is set against the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt. The Israelites had come to be hated because they were so numerous and were threatening to overwhelm the Egyptians. An order had gone out from Pharaoh that all male Israelite children were to be killed as soon as they were born. But his own daughter sees the infant Moses in the reeds by the Nile and arranges for him to join her household when he grows up.

In the meantime Moses's own mother is employed as his nurse, and so his life is saved thanks to his mother's love and to Pharaoh's daughter's compassion.

Fast forward several thousand years, to the scene at the foot of the cross on which Jesus has been crucified and is in agony. How could any mother bear to watch this cruel execution of her child? But of course Mary had been warned by Simeon in today's Gospel that a sword would pierce her own soul too. Come to that, how could any human being bear to watch it? Anyone who has been to performances of the Passion story like at Wintershall near Guildford in Surrey will never forget the sound of the women's tears and Christ's agonising cries. Yet Mary his mother did not flinch, along with two other women and the disciple John – all other supporters had gone into hiding.

So human beings are capable of great, self-effacing love as well as extreme cruelty, both to other humans but also to animals and the natural world around us – and not only in the Bible but today as we hear often in the media, most recently in the story of the abandoned baby in Sussex. How can it be that we are susceptible to such cruel behaviour towards others who are also made in the same image and likeness as we are?

At the beginning of the book of Genesis that image is intact and the likeness is shining. But very soon we see that although the image remains intact, our likeness to God has become depressingly tarnished: Cain has murdered his brother Abel and so it goes on through history. What has happened? What has happened is that God has given us free will, just as with Adam, to choose either to follow him in loving obedience, or to follow the devices and desires of our own hearts (to quote the BCP) and allow the serpent or the devil to dominate us and therefore to ignore God. Once Adam and Eve (our prototypes) had discovered and eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the damage was done. Or was it? The question that no one except God can answer is "Was this God's original plan for humanity?"

But this is to a large extent a redundant academic argument, because two thousand years ago God decided to come among us himself, conceived in a virgin called Mary by his Holy Spirit - God and Human in one person, someone who looked human and behaved in a divine way. This was the prototype which Adam should have been, behaving in the way in which Adam was intended to behave. That way ended tragically on the cross – or did it? Yes, Jesus suffered agonies at the hands of the authorities and occupiers, so he knows how we suffer, but crucially he overcame evil by rising to new life which gives us hope for the future. He taught us how to love even our enemies. He continues to teach us.

But of course it is not just that humans can be cruel: we can also be selfish, deceitful and proud. Things go on in our heads, which only God knows about, or we may end up saying and doing things which wound other people and can be similarly cruel to the examples in the readings today. You can probably tell I'm doing a Safeguarding course at the moment. This is why the only way is to follow the way of the Cross, as we do during this season of Lent and beyond, to overcome evil in all its forms, for example modern slavery, with the love that Jesus has demonstrated to us and which we see exemplified in the behaviour of his mother, of Pharaoh's daughter, and for that matter of Ruth in the book of that name, or of Hannah the mother of Samuel.

What better words to describe this love than those of St Paul in his letter to the Colossians, Chapter 3 vv 12-17: "As God's chosen ones.....clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another, and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony". PBW – 16.3.2023