

**Sermon for 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2009**  
**Mothering Sunday**  
**Col 3:12-17 and Luke 2:33-35**

I am well aware that Mothering Sunday, although it is a time for celebration and offering thanks to mothers, it not always a good time for some people. Sadly there are those who are unhappy because their mother is no longer with them, or because a child is no longer with them to celebrate. We see, too often in the news, tales of mother's who have abused their children, or have failed to love them in a way that we might expect. And there are those for whom it is difficult because they have not, for a variety of reasons, been able to become a mother.

All that said, we need to remember the origins of this day. It is a day that was often called refreshment Sunday – being mid way through Lent and a chance for those who are fasting to have some refreshment. But, perhaps more importantly for us, it was the day when those in service were given time off to go and visit their mothers. I have fond memories of talking to an elderly lady at Burghfield Methodist church who had been in service and used to walk home to Burghfield on Mothering Sunday to see her mother.

Yesterday the Arts Section of my newspaper produced a list of 50 maternal icons. Mother's who have left their mark on the world. Being the Arts section, the examples were from plays, Opera, Television and Cinema as well as Paintings. So at number 3 was Marge Simpson – described as the linchpin of her family and a staunch if uninspired home maker. At 13 is Lady Bracknell from Oscar Wilde's comedy 'The Importance of being Ernest' – described as a formidable, cynical snob. Peggy Archer is at 27; Dot Cotton of East Enders at 38; Hamlet's mother Gertrude is at 6; Widow Twankey, Aladdin's grumpy mother is at 19 and John Lennon's mother Julia is at 50 – despite the fact that she abandoned him to her sister's care.

It was not always possible to see how the compiler of the list came to his order of merit – although he did have a headline of 'Magnificent matriarchs, Monster mothers and Marvellous mums – but for us it would be quite obvious why he put as his number 1, Mary the mother of Jesus; not only for artistic reasons, but for her example of motherhood to us all.

Our reading from Luke's gospel shows us one of those very strange moments in Mary's life. She and Joseph would have been so excited, taking Jesus to the temple for the Purification. They find themselves with an elderly priest, Simeon, who, just before our passage, recited what we now know as the Nunc Dimittis – those words that give thanks that God had allowed him to live long enough to see his Son on earth. And instead of the normal expressions of excitement at meeting a young couple with their new baby, poor Mary hears that her baby will cause the fall and rise of many in Israel, he will be a sign that will be opposed and – a dreadful thought for Mary – a sword will pierce her own soul too. Although Mary knew that her child was the son of God, she certainly had no idea what his destiny was to be and none of us can imagine how she

felt, hearing these words. There are several places in the Bible where we hear that Mary 'pondered these things in her heart' and I guess she must have done the same on this day.

We know very little about Jesus' life until he started his public ministry but I am sure we can all imagine what it would have been like at home. Mary trying to ensure that he behaved properly, did his school work, worked alongside his father and understood right and wrong. She would, I am sure have ensured that food was on the table, that clothes were washed and the house cleaned.

But I am also sure that Jesus learnt about the warmth of human love. Our reading from Colossians, although not meant to be a description of motherly love, certainly does use words that do describe it. Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience are all the qualities that mother's would aspire to - even if they don't always find it easy to demonstrate them. And further qualities are forbearance and forgiveness. But the really important thing that Paul stresses for Christians is that all of these qualities are bound together by love. One can imagine Jesus growing up in a household that demonstrated all these qualities, they are qualities we would all want children to experience and develop. Sadly we only have to read the papers and watch the television to know that this is not the case for many children in our world.

One of the foremost Christian groups for the nurture of family life in its many forms is the Mother's Union. Although its name might imply that only mothers can join, it is, in fact open to men and women, married, single divorced and widowed. It is a worldwide organisation that started in Alresford in Hampshire and now works in every Christian country in the world.

We have had a Mother's Union Branch in Burghfield for some years, but it went into abeyance three years ago. It is my hope that we can reopen the Branch, meeting once a month in an afternoon or an evening or, if there are enough of us, having two groups of people who can meet either in the afternoon or the evening, depending on their circumstances.

Groups meet for prayer and worship and usually have a speaker who can talk about some aspect of the work of the Mother's Union, or some aspect of Christianity that might be of interest. Groups also take on projects - for instance I know of one local branch that knits very small baby clothes for the premature baby unit at the Royal Berkshire Hospital. One branch provides the teas and coffees for the Mother and toddler service in their church - providing a surrogate Granny service for the young mums and their children. Other Branches provide a crèche in prisons so that mothers can visit their husbands. Some members of the Mother's Union provide parenting courses; help with marriage preparation and so on. For those who don't want to be involved in specific projects, they can help to raise money to help with giving holidays to those families that cannot afford to go on holiday or funds to help with overseas projects - where the Mother's Union pays to train workers in countries across the world.

You should all have been given a little sheet about the Mother's Union with an area at the bottom that you can fill in if you would like to hear more about it. There is also a small display of Mother's Union material and booklets that you can take away so that you can read about the work that is done worldwide.

On this Mothering Sunday, as we celebrate not just Mother's but all those women who have influenced our lives, and as we remember the sacrifice of Mary, the mother of Jesus I pray the Mother's Union prayer

Loving Lord,

We thank you for your love so freely given to us all.

We pray for families around the world.

Bless the work of the Mothers' Union

as we seek to share your love

through the encouragement, strengthening and support of marriage and family life.

Empowered by your Spirit, may we be united in prayer and worship,

and in love and service reach out as your hands across the world.

In Jesus' name.

Amen

Mary