**John 19:25-27**

**Mothering Sunday**

Today is Mothering Sunday; a really beautiful Festival for us to celebrate together and one that goes way back into antiquity. It was originally a pagan festival, held in honour of the Mother goddess Cybele. After Constantine converted to Christianity, the Roman Empire began to celebrate it as a Christian Festival honouring the Blessed Virgin Mary and Mother Church. During the 16th-century, domestic servants were given the day off so that they could go home and see their own mothers - often the only day of the year when families could come together. By the mid-20th-century, Mothering Sunday was not celebrated in the UK but it was revived by American soldiers who came to Europe to fight during World War II. The US troops celebrated it on the 2nd Sunday in Lent. But when it became widely used through the nation again, we revived it for the 4th Sunday in Lent, which is when it originally was throughout history.

So it’s not a commercial event. It really is a beautiful and thought-provoking Sunday in the midst of our Lent austerities.

And coming as it does during Lent, it is appropriate this morning to link Mothering Sunday with the crucifixion of Christ through our Gospel reading. Because here, in John 19:25-27, the two events are brought together: the creative pain of motherhood and the creative pain of the crucifixion where salvation was won for us all.

And, as we turn to this Gospel reading, we are first confronted by the sheer pain of this moment. A dying son. A bewildered disciple. A mother whose heart is breaking.

Mary knew what it was to suffer. Mary suffered when she gave birth in a filthy stable, far from home. Mary suffered when she heard that Herod wanted to kill her baby. Mary suffered when she was forced to become a refugee in Egypt. Mary suffered as she watched a whole nation misunderstand and taunt her son. And here, at the foot of the cross, Mary suffers again as she watches her beautiful baby boy being crucified for a crime he has not committed.

We can’t even begin to imagine the pain in her heart - how her soul was being torn apart that day.

It wasn’t so long ago that we were celebrating Epiphany. Do you remember the story of Simeon, who had seen Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus at the Temple? In Luke 2:33, Simeon said to Mary: “This child is chosen by God for the destruction and the salvation of many in Israel. He will be a sign from God, which many people will speak against and so reveal their secret thoughts. And sorrow, like a sharp sword, will break your own heart.” And now, at the foot of the cross, perhaps Mary’s mind traveled back 33 years to that moment and Simeon’s prophecy finally made sense to her.

As parents, we experience anguish over our children many times throughout our lives. For some who have lost their own children, Mary can be an important figure of compassion and solidarity as one who identifies with that deep pain.

And, as Mary thinks about her son, so Jesus thinks about his mother. He knows how much she is suffering. Watching her in pain was torment enough, let alone everything else he was going through in those moments. It is almost certainly the case that by the time of Jesus’ crucifixion, Mary was a widow. More grief and bereavement and loss. There is no mention of Joseph after the episode at the Temple, when Jesus was 12 years old. Every time Mary is mentioned in the Gospels - at the wedding in Cana, when she brings Jesus’ brothers and sisters to see him, and so on - there is never any mention of Joseph, who, presumably had died.

Jesus knew her agony and he was aware that, after his own death, there would be no-one to care for his mother. And, as an oldest son, that concerned him. And so Jesus speaks to his mother, verse 26: Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing there; so he said to his mother, ‘He is your son’. Then he said to the disciple, ‘She is your mother’.

Even in his dying moments, Jesus’ concern was for the future well-being of his family.

In Ephesians 6, Paul writes this: “Children, it is your Christian duty to obey your parents, for this is the right thing to do. ‘Respect your father and mother’ is the first commandment that has a promise added: ‘so that all may go well with you, and you may live a long time in the land.’” The idea of ‘obedience’ in Scripture is an interesting one: it is about more than just doing what you are told. The Greek word for ‘obedience’ is actually about ‘listening intently’. And so, for us all who have parents still alive, we are called to listen intently to them; which is an attitude of love and affection, gratitude and respect.

That is the Christlike attitude to have. In Luke 2:51, we are told, “Jesus went back with his parents to Nazareth, where he was obedient to them.” Growing up through the years, loving, listening, showing gratitude and respect. That is the calling on us; to give honour and love and respect where it is due.

But all that being said, I think there might be something deeper still going on in this passage…

I mentioned earlier that Jesus entrusted Mary to the disciple John. But he didn’t entrust her to his brothers and sisters, who were still alive. We know that he had four brothers - James, Joseph, Simon and Judas - and some sisters who are not named. That seems a little strange. Surely one of them could have looked after their mum into old age?

But Jesus doesn’t pursue that option. Why? What else is going on here?

There is something quite profound about what Mary and the disciple John represent to us here. Because here are two people who are there with Jesus at the foot of the cross. Two people who believe in his mission. Two people who believe in his claim to be the Son of God, the Lord and Saviour of the world. This is in stark contrast to Jesus’ brothers. In John 7:5, we are told quite starkly, “Not even his brothers believed in him.”

So it seems that what is happening here, between Jesus the Saviour and the two people at the foot of the Cross who believe in him, is that a new family is being created. Verse 26 again: “Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing there; so he said to his mother, ‘He is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘She is your mother.’ From that time the disciple took her to live in his home.”

A new family is created in the shadow of the cross. Through the blood of Christ shed for us, a new home, a new community comes to life. A new family is born.

It is here, at the foot of the cross, as Jesus sheds his blood and a woman embraces a boy and a boy embraces a woman - it is here that the church is formed!

And as we celebrate the Eucharist this morning, kneeling together at the foot of the cross, sharing the body and blood of Christ - so we are continuing the work that Jesus started that day: the formation and deepening of the church. As we take bread and wine this morning, we are proclaiming the same truth that was acted out that first Good Friday.

Here, in Enfield, is a new community.

Here, in Enfield, is a new family.

Here, in Enfield, is a new fellowship.

We are blood relatives - not through our blood but through his, shed on the cross for us all.

Mary and John formed the church in their relationship with each other. They offered one another comfort. They strengthened each other. They encouraged one another and shared hospitality together.

These, surely, must be the hallmarks of our church today: Love, Comfort, Support and Hospitality. This is what Jesus had in mind when he formed the church from the Cross that first Good Friday.

So, in the final analysis, we see that Mothering Sunday is so much deeper than we might at first imagine. It is a time to celebrate the love of our Mothers, yes. It is a time to celebrate the love of our carers throughout the years. But it is also a time to give thanks for Mother Church, formed in the blood of Christ at the foot of the cross. Mother Church: where we find comfort and support and encouragement and love and hospitality.

Today, we are grateful for our blood relatives - our blood relatives who share the same DNA and our blood relatives who share faith in Jesus Christ.

In our conversations and behaviour today, let’s be sure to celebrate all those we love with thankful hearts. Amen.