

Mothering Sunday 2023 Sermon

By Jonathan Poston

Our Mothering Sunday in the Traditional Church is also known as Laetare Sunday [ley-tahr-ee]

Laetare means 'Rejoice'. And is taken from Psalm 66 – "Rejoice, O Jerusalem: and come together all you that love her: rejoice with joy, you that have been in sorrow: that you may exult." And as we did half way through Advent, it gives us a moment half way through Lent where we can pause and rejoice at the Good News that is to come.

It was also a time, in Downton Abbey days, when those in live-in domestic service were allowed home, to visit their mothers. Hence the whole tradition of Mothering Sunday began.

11 days ago on the 8th March we had International Women's Day which seems a bit low key these days.

I was with a feminist friend of mine that day and I rather provocatively asked her: How come women only get a day when Pride gets a whole month? She just gave me a scathing look and said men have the other 364 days. I was wise enough not to point out that she hadn't actually answered my question.

But although the act of mothering involves not JUST women and birth mothers. I'd like to take this opportunity in the wake of International Women's Day and Mothering Sunday to celebrate exactly those two things. Women and Mothers.

I don't want to step into the minefield of talking about gender and choice and the conversational Jenga that inevitably leads from those kind of heated discussions.

I want to sidestep that and to focus on the gift of women and mothers to the world. Not to virtue signal but because we don't seem to talk about it or acknowledge it much these days. And it is very important that we do.

The only way we talk about equality for women these days seems to focus on equality of financial and career opportunities. Our culture ignores the fact that the female monthly cycle is integral to a woman's life and physiology. And this principle of rhythm: which means there is a best time to rest, a best time to plan, a best time to work hard, is one which our culture has ignored and lost.

I'm sure women talk about it amongst themselves but our culture ignores rhythm and the fact there is an optimum time to do things and an optimum time to not soldier on but to be allowed times of respite without feeling pressured or inadequate.

In a 24/7 world where we can shop in the middle of the night and the internet isn't turned off at midnight it is like constantly living in the glare of the sun. The cycles of day and night and the seasonal cycles: spring, summer, autumn, and winter bring their own mood and opportunities.

I think a more 'female aware' world would understand and engage more with rhythms and cycles. I'm trying to engage more with these cycles myself.

Just being aware of the change of mood as we go from day to night and back again is quite fascinating if we tune into it.

Twilight in story language is seen as that time between dog and wolf. Between the domestic and tamed influence of the day to the wild uncertain darkness where our hair stands on end and our senses of self-preservation are heightened.

Darkness heightens our senses but we prefer instead to flood it with artificial light.

So we have much to learn about rhythm from the female cycle.

And what of motherhood?

2,000 years ago in Bethlehem, in that famous stable (or was it perhaps a cave?) a young woman, Mary, was doing what women had done for even more thousands of years before her and thousands of years after. She was giving birth to a baby boy.

Usually, during such times, a woman is surrounded by all the experienced midwives and doulas who say all the special things you need to hear when you are involved in such a magical and miraculous act.

But this woman was surrounded, on the one hand, by animals in the stable around her, and on the other, a heavenly host that spoke to her in that twilight consciousness that she inhabited that all women move into, as their bodies are overcome, by the primal power of contractions, as the universe takes over the body of a birthing mother, to bring a brand new individual into the world.

The act of giving birth is an act of surrender to the contractions of the body. A trust that the body knows what it is doing. Like love itself giving birth is such a personal and intimate and individual act and yet it is also one which millions of people experience. It is, without doubt, the most awesome experience any human being can go through.

And with it comes the sacrifice. You have externalised yourself. Given birth to something that you care about so much that you are desperate to protect and nurture it for a lifetime.

Could Mary have known the fate of Jesus even as she held him as a small child in her arms? I have a feeling she did. Like Hannah with Samuel she bore him knowing that his life belonged to God

I really don't see Mary as a passive character in the way that many others seem to. She certainly surrendered herself to God's will but that does not mean she was like a quiet meek child.

When we think of saints we often associate them with their great struggle against their lower nature to finally commit themselves to a life fully wedded to Christ. Even Jesus after his baptism went off for 40 days and nights to wrestle with his lower human nature, in order to prepare himself for his spiritual mission.

If Jesus had to do it then I'm sure Mary was no exception. She too will have had to wrestle with her demons in order to reach the point where God's angel saw her as worthy of such a mighty spiritual act as the embodiment of the Christ through her own body.

Many Madonna icons and statues have Mary gazing dreamily at the Christ child who is the focus of her life. But I suggest you make time to have a look at the amazing Mary statue in our Beauchamp chapel to the side of the altar there. Mary's stare is powerful and determined. We are so lucky to have such an icon. There is nothing dreamy about her. She is a powerful figure.

Don't be afraid to go and have a conversation with her in your holy imagination. She'll speak to you.

And finally, in our Gospel story, Mary is before her crucified Son with John his beloved disciple. And Jesus then moves motherhood onto a new level.

There are no blood ties between Mary and John. But Jesus tells Mary that John is now her son and to John he says that Mary is his mother.

As Mary will hold her son in her arms in that powerful image of the Pieta as he is taken from the cross and she holds his broken body, she also is called to mother us all. And we too are called to be mother to all and to be protective, caring son to all.

So today we celebrate women in a belated International Women's Day, and particularly Mothers who sacrifice so much for us and for the world in all their multiplicity of character, determination and love.

Motherhood is an awesome calling.

Amen.