

Lent IV 2019, Mothering Sunday Rosslyn Chapel. March 31st 2019

In the Name.....

You will know of the story of Burridan's ass. This daft donkey, placed equidistant between two piles of food, could not decide which to eat and died of starvation. Incidentally, my spellcheck did not know Burridan's ass and suggested I change it to Borodin's ass, which I felt unfair to a composer I greatly admire. Well this daft donkey (me) having a choice from our Redemptorists Pew Leaflet of several readings for Lent IV (Mothering Sunday), has chosen none of them. Instead I have taken the 25th verse of the 4th chapter of the Epistle to the Galatians **"Jerusalem which is above, is free, which is the Mother of us all"**

This text comes from the Prayer Book epistle for Lent IV and is supposed to be the reason that Mothering Sunday was placed at this point in the Church's Calendar. The various titles used give a variety of choice to the preacher on the 4th Sunday of Lent. Today, mid-Lent, is often called "Refreshment Sunday", a title suggested from the Gospel, St. John Ch 6, on this Sunday in the Book of Common Prayer.

The origins of Mothering Sunday are in England. In parishes with "Daughter" Churches it became customary for young people who were working to come up at mid-Lent to the Mother Church. Young people who were working away from home were given a free day to visit their Mothers and their Mother Church. The former Provost of St. Mary's Cathedral, the Very Revd. Dr. Graham Forbes regularly referred to the cathedral as "the Mother Church of the Diocese" and rightly so.

Anyway, Mothering Sunday was an opportunity for a family reunion. They would bring a gift to their Mother - a simnel cake or a posy of spring flowers. While the Church still holds on to the title of "Mothering Sunday", emphasizing the role of "Mothering", and Christian nurture, secular society has renamed it with an Americanism: "Mother's Day". A day which developed from a homely custom has been hijacked for/by commercial interests. "Mothers Day" is to Mothering Sunday what grey squirrels are to red squirrels.

An old story tells of the visit of an angel to earth. Before returning he took three items as mementoes - a bouquet of flowers, a child's smile, and a Mother's love. As he went back to heaven he saw that the flowers were losing their fragrance and the smile was turning to a frown. On his arrival, he told his friends who were waiting to welcome him: "There is only one thing on earth which retains its beauty- A Mother's Love".

While words may change their meaning or become tarnished by constant use; "Motherhood" is one of the few which has fixed meaning. It never changes. While

the word "love" may have several shades of meaning for some, when we talk of "Motherhood" our meaning is clear. The Jews have a saying, "God could not be everywhere, so he made Mothers". In Christian teaching central place is given to the Fatherhood of God. Among many, there is a desire to have the complementary idea of Motherhood. The hunger in the human heart for Mothering is expressed by Isaiah: "As a Mother comforts her child so I will comfort you, says the Lord", (Ch 66.13). These words complement those of the Psalmist: "As a Father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him". (Psalm 103.13).

There are times when we need all that is Fatherly in God. On other occasions nothing but the Motherly will do. I know this; when my children hurt themselves, are frightened, or feel unwell - only mum will do; I am definitely the second choice (and that is probably only because there isn't a third!).

It is said that "Man's extremity is God's opportunity". God does for us what no one else can do. He comforts our sorrows, heals our pain and provides for our needs. On Mothering Sunday we ought to spare a thought for all Women. In answer to the question, "Who is my Mother, or Brothers", Jesus replied, "Whoever does the will of God is my Brother, my Sister and Mother". Those who believed in him and followed him were Brothers, Sisters and Mother. "A friend in need is a friend in deed". The number of Women who have sacrificed their own future on behalf of others, caring for younger members of the family after a Parent's death, or devoting themselves to an elderly Parent must not be forgotten.

The names of Florence Nightingale caring for wounded Soldiers and that of Mother Theresa in the slums of Calcutta are well known. Much less well-known are the names of many who found their Motherly instinct fulfilled in service to every kind of human need for Christ's sake, doing what they did as to him. As one of God's ways for caring for us is as a Mother, let us all come to him as his Children - in child-like humanity, wonder and simple trust. But it isn't easy.

Northern European religion is a rather dour masculine thing. John Updike said, *I don't think God plays well in Sweden. God sticks pretty close to the equator.* This has certainly been some people's experience. The Revd. Peter Mullen described his trip to St Andrew's to give some lectures to some Scottish schoolteachers. *"Whether it was that unfortunate combination of pedagogy and Puritanism - or whether it was just the weather - I'm not exactly sure, but they were hard going: people for whom, you might say, jokes were no laughing matter. St Andrew's itself seemed rich in history and culture, but even so there was something severe about it: the porridge-coloured architecture and the strong east wind. Seven miles out to sea and half hidden under the mist was the island of Crail: the place where John Knox*

put ashore to bring the Scots the good news of their damnation It looked the ideal place for Strindberg or Ibsen to commit suicide".

As John Updike says, how different when you go south. I was on the north east coast of Spain many years ago and I remember the village square was filled with youngsters in colourful clothes: girls in white dresses and veils; boys in red and blue shirts. The church was dazzling white and the bells were ringing for a Confirmation. I went in. It was ablaze with light. Candles and chandeliers. Before the altar was the huge, smiling statue of the Black Madonna covered in flowers. The service was joyful, wholehearted - not like the psyched up, faking it ecstasy that you get among the English aisle-dancers. And afterwards everyone spilled out into the square for flowing wine and plates of fresh seafood, olives, home-baked bread. It reminded me of W.H.Auden's religious preference when he spoke of being *Catholic in an easy-going Mediterranean sort of way - lots of local saints.*

This is the feminine side of religion and it is embodied in the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is there at all the crucial moments in the history of our salvation. How she binds the whole story together in a tale of cradling and cuddling and comforting. The pictures blend into one another in an epic of tenderness about which the great painters tell us the truth. She holds the Christ-child in his swaddling clothes. She holds him again in the *Pieta* after the taking down from the Cross. And then there is a miraculous inversion as Mary's soul is carried by her Son at her Assumption. We northern Europeans need to rediscover what we have lost, to become possessed again by the feminine vision. What medieval Christian people knew was that her care for the Crucified Christ became emotionally transplanted into her care for us. If she is the Mother of Jesus, she is surely Our Mother. She is with us in our ordeals. She is there in our loss. Why do we only *think* about the truth of our religion? We should *feel* it too. But devotion to the Virgin Mary is not just emotional; it is deeply theological. They don't come any more theological than St Thomas Aquinas and he said, *When Mary said, "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord!" it was the sign that a spiritual marriage was to take place between the Son of God and human nature. The Annunciation sought the Virgin's assent to this on behalf of all humanity.* The biggest battle in which Mary's help was called for was that against the false thinking which had - and still has - the power to corrupt us. This is the Manichaeian heresy which goes back to the earliest times. Of course, mention a heresy and people think you're only talking about something obscure and irrelevant from the old days. Nothing could be further from the truth. Heresies are lies, living evils, spiritual cancers with the capacity to ruin us. This heresy says that the world of material things was not made by God and that it is evil. Christ was never made flesh. He was a mere phantom. It says what we must try to do is join the Illuminati and escape from the world of the flesh. This heresy threatened the very existence of the Christian faith in the days of St Augustine and again in the middle ages when it was preached by the Albigensians, sometimes called Cathars,

in the south of France. They believed that they were pure and sinless and did not need the Sacraments. They said the church was doing the devil's work. They condemned marriage, would not eat meat or drink milk.

The church was very nearly overcome by these heretics until God raised up Simon de Montfort to fight a Crusade and St Dominic with a vision of the Rosary. Now the Rosary is not just a set of pretty beads: it commemorates things of the flesh and affirms all the things which the Cathars denied. It features the real physical Christ in the created physical world. It bids us meditate upon the sorrowful mysteries of Mary - the scourging of Christ, his crucifixion and death; the joyful mysteries - his real physical birth and his ministry in Galilee; the glorious mysteries - his true resurrection and ascension. All these things celebrate the body, the material world which God has made. And they condemn the disembodied, spiritual arrogance of the Cathar Illuminati. They condemn these things in the name of Mary who is the Mother who swaddles and suckles her child. One of her oldest titles is Star of the Sea and her robe is blue. That is her title for the Society of Mary in this Diocese, of which I am chaplain. Good old St Dominic then for a colourful piece of history.

But the Manichaean heresy is not just dead and gone: it is prevalent today in the world's - and especially some modern churchmen's - denial of the fact of sin. It is there in the rather hubristic statement of the late Professor Stephen Hawking who said he was about to proclaim a *grand theory of everything*. *It will be in the form of an equation and we shall be able to print it on our T-shirts*. And then, as he modestly put it, *we shall know the mind of God*. I am no mathematician, but I am sure there is no equation that you can put on a T-shirt that can console a crying child or grieving parent.

The gist of this recurrent heresy is that humankind is in no need of forgiveness, because what we do in the physical world doesn't count for anything at all. The humility of Mary of the Rosary is the antidote to the blasphemous arrogance of this. She is the vehicle of the true gospel. Some psychologists and other theorists say she represents *the feminine principle*. What utter twaddle! No she doesn't. She is not an idea, or a principle or an abstraction. She *is*. And she is the one in whom the Word was made flesh.

And so we pray: *Show thyself our Mother, Offer him our sighs; Who for us incarnate, did not thee despise.*

In the Name... Amen.