

Although Mothering Sunday is generally a time for celebration and offering thanks to mothers and to God for the love and care they reflect, it can also be a difficult time for many people.

I know that there are those who will feel a sense of sadness because their mother is no longer with them, or because a child is no longer with them to celebrate.

There are some for who memories of childhood are painful, because love has not been shown in the way that we might hope or 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.

Acknowledging this, however, it is right and good to mark this day in a special way. Throughout our lives, joy and sorrow are so often intertwined, and in both we can know God's presence with us, and come to appreciate his love and care for us.

A little background to the marking of Mother's Day in America and Mothering Sunday in this country...

Mother's Day as it is known in the United States of America was formally inaugurated on 9th May 1914, by an act of Congress. President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day. President Wilson established the day as a time for "public expression of our love and reverence for the mothers of our country."

A form of Mother's Day was first suggested in 1870, during the American Civil War, by Julia Ward Howe (who wrote the lyrics to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic"). She organized a number of annual gatherings in Boston beginning in 1872. Alongside these a friend, Mrs Anna Reeves Jarvis, who was involved in the peace movement, called for a special day in which prayers for mothers and for their children would be offered along with prayers for peace and non-violent solutions for disputes between the family of the nations. These campaigns led directly to President's Wilson's establishment of Mother's Day and gave rise to the tradition of distributing carnations on Mother's Day.

In this country, our tradition of a special day to express love and thanks for mothers, dates back further. In England, since at least the 17th Century, the Fourth Sunday of Lent was known as "Mothering Sunday". It was a day when mothers were honoured. Servants who worked in service and lived in the homes of the aristocracy and wealthy were given the day off and encouraged to return to their homes and spend time with their mothers. A tradition arose of baking of special type of fruit cake, known as a Simnel Cake and taking this as a gift along with a posy of wild flowers licked on the walk home across the fields.

Society has changed a lot since then, but the basic principle of having a day to acknowledge and give thanks for the special and particular role of mothers is still important.

A few years ago, the Arts Section of a newspaper produced a list of 50 maternal icons. Mothers 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, with the headline:

“Magnificent matriarchs, Monster mothers and Marvellous mums”

So at number 3 was Marge Simpson – described as the linchpin of her family and a staunch, if uninspired home maker.

Hamlet’s mother Gertrude was at 6;

At 13 was Lady Bracknell from Oscar Wilde’s comedy ‘The Importance of being Ernest’ – described as formidable, cynical and a mother-in-law to be avoided!

Widow Twankey, Aladdin’s grumpy mother was at 19

Peggy Archer was at 27;

Dot Cotton of East Enders at 38;

John Lennon’s mother, Julia at 50.

It was not always possible to see how the compiler of the list came to his order of merit...

– 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.

In our reading from John's gospel, we see an insight into the depth of love and concern that Mary and Jesus had for one another. Mary standing with pain and sorrow in her heart, as she witnessed the pain and agony of her Son on the Cross. And, even in the midst of that pain, Jesus reaching out in love to ensure the support and care of his mother from that point on.

Scenes from Jesus' life must have been flashing through Mary's mind, as she tried to make sense of what was happening.

There was the time when she and Joseph had taken the baby Jesus to the temple for the Purification. When, they found themselves with an elderly priest, Simeon. 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 cannot have had any real idea what his destiny was to be. None of us can imagine how she must have felt, hearing these words, when Jesus was only a baby. There are several places in the Bible where we hear that Mary “*pondered these things in her heart.*” As the life of Jesus unfolds in the Gospel accounts, and as we make this journey through Lent together, it is clear that Mary, as a mother, came to know in a very profound way, that intertwining of joy and sorrow.

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 know that this is not always the case for many children in our world today.

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 nearly every country in the world.

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.

Groups also take on projects – such as knitting very small baby clothes for premature baby units, or providing crèches 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. Others 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.

The work of groups like the Mother's Union, reminds us that today is not just about mothers. Returning for a moment to the historical background to today. It is significant that in this country, today is traditionally called Mothering Sunday, and not Mothers' Day.

I think the distinction is important, because there are many who share in the task of loving and caring for us as we journey through life from childhood into adulthood. There are many who we can each think of who have in a whole variety of different ways mothered us – it might be a teacher, a nurse, a social worker, a member of the emergency services – anyone who has modelled those qualities of love and compassion that St Paul describes in his letter to the Colossians.

On this Mothering Sunday, then - we celebrate and give thanks for Mother's and their special role in our lives and the life of society.

We also give thanks for all those who have influenced our lives, by the showing of love, compassion and kindness and have helped us in a whole variety of ways in our journey of life.

I would like to end with a slightly adapted version of the The Mother's Union prayer, which is a beautiful prayer, which we can make our own, as we ask God's blessing on our homes and families today:-

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 all who 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