

Sermon for 27 March 2022 – Lent 4 – Mothering Sunday – Jane Brough

Today of course is Mothering Sunday. It may seem to be a day taken over by the secular world. It may seem to be all about celebrating people's biological mothers. It's certainly a day that many people find difficult as well as wonderful. The church is the place that holds all the pieces together and invites us to look more deeply at the family God calls us to be.

Psychologists tell us that the deepest fear of children expresses itself in separation anxiety – the fear of being abandoned by their parents. Children are afraid that the love which brought them into the World which names and claims them, which gives them security, will be withdrawn so that they will end up discarded and disowned and left on the scrap heap. Separation anxiety is the fear of living in the absence of familiar love, of having no place to belong to, of being left at the lost property office unlooked for and unclaimed. Can you imagine what the refugee children of the Ukraine are feeling at this time. Of course, we don't have to be geniuses to appreciate that that fear is not limited to children! It's part of the baggage of all of us. I'm sure that the mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers, brothers and sisters in the Ukraine are all feeling this loss as they are separated from each other.

We all know from experience that there is no such thing as automatic love. It's not automatic that a father loves his son, or that a brother loves his brother or that a daughter loves her mother. We know that when some young people leave some homes their absence is not registered as a loss but greeted with relief. They are summed up as being 'just a dead loss'.

That attitude of writing people off as a lost cause causes the problem in today's Gospel. The sinners come to hear Jesus, but the Pharisees and Scribes come to complain that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. The Pharisees want Jesus to let the sinners stay lost. Why bother with the likes of them? The Pharisees, whose name means 'separated ones' see themselves as having no relationship with the sinners. Jesus sees both groups as children of the Father and, therefore, brother and sister to each other. Rather than argue the point, Jesus tells a story about a father who has two sons and who loses them both.

The younger son gets lost in the far country while the elder son gets lost staying at home. The younger son leaves home but his journey leads him to a place of hunger, of degradation, and of possible death. He is in danger of dying far away, forgotten and forsaken. But the younger son who comes to his senses in a pigpen when he realises that he doesn't really belong there but has a home to belong to. There's nothing like hunger to sharpen your sense of belonging! The prospect of regular, square meals is enough to head him in the right direction and he makes the journey of return with a full speech and an empty stomach.

All this time his father has not accepted the loss of his son as 'just one of those things'. His son's being lost has not nullified their relationship, if the son has let go of his father, the father has not let go of his son. He is a father who stays on the lookout, whose eyes hunt the horizon for the return of his son, whose love educates his hope that his son will come back. And when he does see his son a long way off, he is moved with pity to run and meet him. When someone comes to meet you, your journey is always shorter. The father's love takes the initiative. He meets his son with love's extravagance and rather than listening to a boring speech, he organises a good party. After all his son is found.

The elder son on the other hand is the type who stays out in the fields long after the cows have come home. When he makes his return journey, unlike his younger brother he doesn't make it home. His father comes out a second time that day to meet a son, but all he gets is another boring speech! 'All these years I have slaved for you' shows how the elder brother sees his dedication to duty as slavery. He is enslaved by his own sense of justice. He wants

to maintain the estate without any obligation to his brother. He has no reach in him. In fact, he 'is the separated one' who refuses to recognise his brother as his brother, but is content for him to stay lost. Unlike his father he cannot surprise his brother with the quality of his mercy. His hard work has made him hard hearted.

As Yeats wrote: Too long a sacrifice, can make a stone of the heart.

Now it is he who is far from home. He is 'the separated one' who cannot accept this brother and rejoice with him. The father loves both his sons, and he lives in hope that they will love and accept each other. The father's attitude reflects the generosity of Jesus way of dealing with sinners. Jesus has both sons represented in his audience, the separate ones who like the elder son, refuse to welcome their brothers' sinners, and the sinners who like the younger son, hope to be accepted when they make for home.

God created us in his own image – he gave us all the ability to love, but he also gave us free will, we can choose how we act, as parents and as children. Love is absent setting people free to be their own person. It doesn't mean you stop loving someone but sometimes it's scary to step back and give the person you love freedom to choose and its so emotional that you're not sure what to do. That's ok because God understands, he loves us so much he has allowed us to make our won choices, but as Christians we believe he is always there to guide and comfort us when things don't go as we had expected.

A wise person once said, "God couldn't be everywhere, so he made mothers!" But to make mothers, God must surely have had the components within himself.

He is our Father–Dad-Abba, but he also loves us, cares for us, trains and instils gentle qualities in us, like a mother. And who but a mother could have the patience with us that God shows? This lent and seriously for the rest of our lives, may we also resolve to be quick to take the initiative in the business of repentance and confession, God is waiting on the lookout for us, wanting us, willing us to dump our pride and come boldly – yet in humility and repentance- to ask for forgiveness.

How long will he wait?

Dare we really try his patience any longer?

Amen