

Fourth Sunday in Lent – Mothering Sunday

The fourth Sunday in Lent is traditionally called Mothering Sunday. It seems to have begun when the church adapted a Roman festival of the mother goddess as a celebration of Mary as a mother and of the idea of “mother church”. Centuries later, on this day people would go “a-mothering”-visiting their local mother church, such as a cathedral. Later still, this was a day when domestic servants allowed to visit their mothers and families. There might be a traditional Simnel cake - which has its own symbolism - to celebrate the reunion of families amidst the austerity of Lent.

As I was preparing for today’s talk, I really struggled at first to see the connection between mothering Sunday and the healing of a man who had been blind from birth.

As a boy Robert Louis Stevenson was intrigued by the work of the old lamplighter who went about with a ladder and a torch, setting the street lights ablaze for the night. One evening in Edinburgh, Scotland, as young Robert stood watching with childish fascination, his parents heard him exclaim, "Look, look! There is a man out there punching holes in the darkness!"

With one statement of childish wonder, Robert Louis Stevenson summed up the life of Jesus. He came into this world and accomplished many great and miraculous wonders, yet His primary purpose was to punch great gaping holes in the spiritual darkness that shrouded this world. He came to be The Light Of The World.

The man in today’s gospel was born blind, he had never seen the light. He was thrilled with the healing he experienced from his chance encounter with the man who cured him. He rejoiced in the gift but did not know the giver. He was able to see the light, both literally and spiritually, through the miracle Jesus performed.

Restoration of sight is not among the healings in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, only Jesus healed the blind. Yet in the gospels, the restoration of eyesight is among the most common of Jesus’ healing works.

In scripture, the restoration of sight is associated with the ministry of the Messiah. Luke tells us about Jesus reading from Isaiah in the synagogue: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind . . .” So the blind man received physical sight, and spiritual sight as he recognised and believed in Jesus.

In his healing ministry, Jesus dealt with people as best met their needs. And in the same way, God heals us. He knows what is best for us and as we reach out in faith. And this for me is a key feature of mothering, reaching out to people, thinking about what is best for them and meeting their needs. Mothers do this all the time with their children, it’s a natural instinct. And its that same natural instinct that makes us want to reach out to help people in need.

Jesus has commissioned us to minister healing in the same way, in the power of the Holy Spirit. You might say this was a mothering ministry, something we are all called to, not just mothers. He invites us to minister to each other, to bring the light to those in darkness as he did to the blind man, bringing us into relationship with each other and into a closer relationship with God. As human beings we are made for relationships. When we feel lonely or hurt, who do we turn to?

As children, I'm sure we would often have turned to our mothers and those in our community whose ministry was mothering. We find comfort in community, in family life where we can strengthen and support one another, in those who mother us. We get a sense of being in it together and that is particularly evident at this time when we are facing the challenges and difficulties of life.

Through today's gospel, God shows us the importance of this caring and compassionate ministry, a mothering ministry. He wants us, as his sons and daughters, to know his loving care and compassion towards us and for us. And we in turn reflect this loving relationship by caring now for each other in so many ways.

Jesus' care, compassion and love for us all is best demonstrated while he was on the cross, suffering for us. Even at that point, his concern isn't for himself – he is compassionate and caring for his mother Mary and for John, the disciple whom he loved. In John 9 we hear: *"When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.*

Even at the moment of his death, Jesus' heart is open to those who suffer. He knew what Mary was going through - her pain and her grief, and so he tenderly wanted to provide for her. By doing this, Jesus revealed his love for his family, and for us.

By following Jesus' call, we are demonstrating that sense of family, of community, of belonging; that sense of mothering which comes through in the triangle of caring and compassion that we have between Jesus, Mary and John.

On Mothering Sunday we have an opportunity to say thank you to those people in our lives who care for us, who show us compassion and kindness; to our mothers, to those who are like mothers to us.

We are all called to a mothering ministry of one kind or another, because we are created in the image of God, who looks after us as his children. Jesus invites us into this new family of everlasting love and mutual belonging, to belong to him and to each other.