

Mothering Sunday, 27.03.22

Exodus 12: 1-10; John 19: 25b-27

The reconciling heart of God

Last Sunday, Martin and Sunday school reminded us of the story of Moses in the bullrushes. As always, we adults are just catching up – here is the story again as today's first reading.

We know more details about Moses' birth and early life than anyone else in the Bible apart from Jesus, and there are parallels with Jesus which resonate with the world today and sadly, our heightened awareness of power, oppression and violence.

Both Moses and Jesus are born into a context of intense persecution, their lives threatened. Both are spared and rescued in ways that demonstrate God's intervention, both are called to lead God's people from slavery to freedom...

In all of this, we see **the reconciling heart of God**. And that's my focus this Mothering Sunday, **God's powerful, reconciling love** in both today's readings, which have family at their heart, and what we can learn for our own lives.

You will have noticed that **women** come out of the Moses story pretty well, starting with Shiphrah and Puah in the previous chapter of Exodus, those canny Hebrew midwives who spare Moses' life. But three months on, his family live in fear that their son will be discovered and killed: they can no longer keep him safe at home. Yet his mother's parental gut instinct to protect, gives birth to the ingenious plan.

God's love is seen in her love.

God's love motivates the drive to protect life, even as Moses' mother has to let her son go.

Recent images from Ukraine have shown similar desperate plans as loving parents protect their children even when it means separation from them.

However that's not the end of the story.

Back in Egypt, the royal edict that has designated the Nile a place of infant slaughter, is reversed- through God's powerful love- to make it a place of protection and new life.

Pharaoh's power to kill is defeated by God's power to save.

Sister Miriam's daring, motivated by God's love, allies with the courage of Pharaoh's daughter, as she finds the baby, chooses love over hatred, defies her father.

Indeed, this miraculous rescue has so struck a chord for all parents that we use 'Moses baskets' to hold babies safe and swaddled, to sleep in peace – sometimes!

Where Pharaoh's fear leads to oppression, we see how God's powerful, reconciling love releases compassion, in and through people. And where families are being destroyed, God's love works to restore and reconcile – so let us pray wholeheartedly for this today, in Eastern Europe and here in Durham, as we support the work of our women's refuge with our gifts.

Near the start of his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes of God's powerful, reconciling love, in Christ:

For in him, (Christ) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Col 1 v 19-20 (p.214)

This is the cosmic work of God, to reconcile all things on earth and in heaven to himself, through the self-giving death of Christ. God's great reconciliation reconnects all things *to himself* – and thus to his powerful love, the very essence of God's being.

It includes all countries and continents, all creatures and peoples, all that is broken and will one day be reconciled and renewed, when Christ returns. Until that day, the reconciling heart of God is made known in every act of compassion and forgiveness, great and small.

Thus, the rescue of a tiny baby is a foretaste in microcosm of God's reconciling love for the whole cosmos.

The safe passage of a refugee family to reunion in safety with loved ones, is God's powerful, reconciling love in action.

Yet even as I say this, we ask, what about the others, the innocents killed in war and terror, in Moses' day, in Jesus' day, in our day?

I have no answers - other than to say we must struggle, in questioning and

protesting, in debate and prayer, and we must trust in God's love.
God's love means not one sparrow falls, not one child dies,
without God's knowledge or outside of God's love.
Nor does a single mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle,
cousin, sister, brother or friend grieve alone, for God has entered into the
heart of the world's suffering and pain, in Jesus Christ.

All of which takes us to the cross, and today's gospel reading,
part of John's account of Jesus's crucifixion.
Here is the cosmic event through which
God was pleased to reconcile all of creation to himself.
And right at the centre is a vulnerable small group, standing near the cross.
The women who feel compelled to be there, the young friend who slips in
through the crowds.
Jesus sees this, sees his mother in her agony,
sees John in his confusion and loss,
and lovingly gives them to each other,
to bring each other comfort, strength and hope,
to draw them together into the reconciling heart of God.
Even at the height of his own pain, Jesus is not blinded to the needs of others:
the new family he establishes is an expression of the new life
which comes through his death.
Some see this passage as the beginning of 'mother church', the commitment
and closeness of relationship that Christ wants for the church, his body on
earth. Certainly, it is a mandate for welcome, compassion, generosity to be the
hallmarks of how we live as Christ's followers.

As we consider our response to refugees from the Ukraine,
and seek to put their needs before our own in our prayers and giving,
we follow Christ's example.

As we support the refuge, we know it is Christ's work
to protect and empower vulnerable women and children.

Similarly, when we support DASH,
Durham Action for Single Housing
we know their work among men without families to support them,
is Christ's work.

I've spoken today of God's cosmic work of reconciliation,
and how we see it in microcosm in every act of compassion.
I've mentioned the organisations and causes
we can support in prayer and giving.

Finally, both these readings are deeply personal and relational.
In the last two years, families and households have taken on
a new significance in the way we live.
I hope we value each other more;
I hope we live daily with a greater awareness of how precious life is.
It's a truism that you can choose your friends but not your relatives:
may we instead receive *every* person as a gift from God,
with whom to share his powerful, reconciling love,
not in our own strength, but through the Holy Spirit,
God with us, every day.

Amen.