

Brancepeth sermon
15 March 2026

Colossians 3:12-17

John 19:25b-27

Psalm 127:1-4

*Open our ears, O Lord,
to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,
that we may serve you today and always. Amen*

So: today we celebrate Mothering Sunday -
you'll have gathered that much already, obviously.

But what, exactly, are we celebrating?

That may seem like a silly question -
it's Mothering Sunday, or Mothers' Day;
isn't it rather obvious what the day is about?

Historically, however, the origins of Mothering Sunday are more than a little obscure.

One of the main theories about its origin is that it didn't have anything to do with human mothers at all, but that it was a day on which people were encouraged to visit their 'mother *churches*' - which might have meant the church where they were baptised, (your mother church being the church where you began your life as a Christian, the church that, in a metaphorical sense, *gave birth to you* as a Christian) or it might have meant visiting your diocese's cathedral (the idea being that a parish church like this is a *daughter* church, part of the *family* of churches that relate to the cathedral, like children to a mother).

So Mothering Sunday may have had nothing to do with thanking and giving presents to your *literal* mother, and everything to do with honouring a mother *church*.

There is another idea as well, though,
which seems to have quite a lot going for it.

It seems that a custom grew up, a few centuries back, of
giving the fourth Sunday in Lent as a holiday to servant girls,
so that they could go home to visit their mothers -
taking, by some accounts, a simnel cake with them.

So, in this case, yes, mothers did feature,
but it wasn't that the day was a festival
in honour of mothers *in general* -
it was a day for a quite specific group of mothers,
the mothers of servant girls,
a chance for them to see their daughters again.

It's only in the twentieth century, as far as I can make out,
that Mothering Sunday became a general festival
for celebrating *all* mothers,
and motherhood in all its forms.

And it's also during the twentieth century
that it ended up merging with '*Mothers' Day*'

which was an import from the United States,
where it had been invented by a woman called Anna Jarvis
in memory of her own mother, in 1908 -
and recognised as a national festival by Congress in 1914 -
though that American Mothers' Day was fixed
for the second Sunday in May.

So, yes, the history is a bit messy,
and the kind of Mothering Sunday we celebrate today
is quite a recent invention.

There's another reason, however,
why you might have questions
about what it is that we are celebrating today -
not a historical question, but - if you like - a *pastoral* one.
That is, there's a reason that has to do with
the *care* we owe to each other, and to those around us;
because Mothering Sunday as it has come to be celebrated
over the past century,
as a festival of mothers and motherhood in general,
is a very difficult festival for many -

and it may, I know, be difficult for some of you.

And if you'll forgive me for stepping into
what may be painful territory for some of you,
it is worth having in our mind some of the reasons
why it might be difficult,
and why we might need to look out for each other's welfare
on a day like today.

Most obviously, there are many women
who would have liked to be mothers,
who perhaps yearned to be mothers,
but for whom the opportunity never arose,
or who found they were not able to conceive,
or who experienced reproductive loss.

And you'll know that that is not at all a rare experience -
far from it.

Then there are some who never wanted to be mothers,
but who are sometimes made
to feel guilty about that on a day like today,

or some whose experience of motherhood
was unusually difficult.

There are also many who have had complex relationships
with their own mothers,
or as mothers with their own children,
for whom the feelings associated with a day like today
may be far from simple, and far from easy.

And, again, those sorts of experiences are far from rare.

So Mothering Sunday can be a day that prompts
grief, guilt, shame, and discomfort,
as much as it prompts gratitude and celebration;
it can be a day on which some avoid church,
or come only with trepidation and unwillingness -
knowing that it can be hard to deal with those
complex and negative feelings
in the midst of all the daffodils and cards in church,
and in the light of all the commercial glitz that
now surrounds the day, in our wider culture -
all the accompanying adverts, for instance,

touting Mothers' Day gifts and events,
and presenting idealised images of mothers and their families.

It can all be a bit too much to take.

There's one more reason, however,
why we might have questions about what it is
that we are celebrating today,
and that has to do with our gospel reading -
the story of Jesus on the cross
seeing his mother, Mary
and the beloved disciple, which is probably John,
and giving them to each other -
telling them to treat each other as family,
to treat each other as mother and son.

Because that is one of a number of stories in the gospels
which show us that Jesus came at questions of family
sideways.

It is, after all, quite a strange fact
in the history of Christianity
that following Jesus came to be associated with
'traditional family values' -
with the idea that the family is
the most important set of relationships you have,
and that family means a mother, a father,
and their biological children,
and that that is really the *only* arrangement
that is decent and respectable.

After all, Jesus' own family background was somewhat irregular,
given that his mother's husband was not his biological father.

And in his own life, Jesus seems to have gone against
his family's wishes in pursuing his ministry,
and, when his mother and brothers came to fetch him,
declared that his *disciples* were his *real* family.

And Jesus and his followers,
heading off on the road to serve the kingdom of God,
seem to have left behind the traditional roles

that were expected of them -
the men didn't take up their role as the heads of households,
the women didn't stay at home looking after the children -
and when people pleaded family obligations as reasons for
delaying their following of Jesus,
he gave them short shrift,
and told them that they had their priorities all wrong.

It's really *very difficult* to make the case that
Jesus was a champion of family values,
in anything like the traditional sense.

But look again at our gospel passage,
and think about what is going on there.
Jesus, even in this moment of extremity,
is thinking of the needs of those around him.
He sees his mother,
probably long a widow by now,
and he sees her as someone for whom he, Jesus,
will obviously no longer be able to provide;

and he knows she needs support:
she needs somewhere to live,
someone to look after the practicalities as she gets older,
but he also knows she needs more than that:
she needs care; she needs to have people in her life,
people who are there for her.
Now more than ever, she needs *family*.

And John, too.

He is described as ‘the disciple whom [Jesus] loved’.

And if you think about it,
that’s likely to mean that he loved Jesus, too -
that he was unusually close to Jesus,
an intimate friend.

All of the disciples, of course,
were losing their leader and their guide,
the person who had been the axis
around which their worlds had been turning
for the past several years,
but John was losing something more;

he was losing his closest friend,

losing *the man who had become a brother to him.*

And so Jesus knows that *John* is going to need someone too,

someone to look after,

someone to give his attention too,

and someone to be there for him.

He knows that John needs to have someone in his life,

to be *family* for him.

So, yes, Jesus *did* care about family -

not as a moralist, who insisted that people matched up

to some idealised picture of what a family should be,

but as someone who *cared about care* -

who cared about his mother and about his friend,

and about the people they would have in their lives,

the people who would look after them,

and be looked after by them -

the people who would care for them, and *be family to them.*

And in these words from the cross,

Jesus *makes* a family:

a non-traditional family, an unusual family;
a family not built from the normal biological ties,
but built from the materials available in front of him;
a family constructed on the go,
a family made *from* care, and *for* care.

So what does that have to say to us today,
about what we are celebrating on this Mothering Sunday?

It *is* good, of course, to celebrate mothers
in the normal meaning of the word –
those who gave birth to us,
and (for most of us) raised us;
and it is good to give thanks for all those here who
have played and are playing and will play that role.

But without diluting that, or downplaying it,
it is *also* good, alongside that,
to celebrate and give thanks for
all who come to play the *role* of mother towards us:
adoptive mothers, fostering mothers,

those friends who have picked up the pieces
when our own mothers were not around,
or when our mothers were not able or not willing
to play the role themselves.

Yes, we celebrate the families made by
marriage and childbirth and ongoing parenting,
families that look something like the image we see
in all those Mothers' Day adverts,
but we also celebrate and give thanks for
all the other families too -
families like the one that Jesus spoke into being from the cross,
families made from the people who are *there*,
families made from friendships,
even families made from congregations,
and the relationships that hold them together
families made from the remnants of other families
when they have broken apart, or suffered loss,
families made with creativity and inventiveness
from whatever lies to hand.

After all, the glue that Jesus used
to stick Mary and John together into a new family
was not anything to do with their biology;
it was not anything to do with their society's expectations;
it was not anything to do with
what was deemed respectable or proper.

The glue that Jesus used to stick Mary and John together
into a new family
was the stuff described in our passage from Colossians:
compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience;
it was a family made from care,
and the willingness to bear with one another.

For some of us, those are things that we learnt
first of all, and perhaps most deeply,
from our own mothers -
and we give grateful thanks for all of that today;
for all the love that was involved
for all the care, and work,

and worry, and sleepless nights
– we celebrate all of that today, with gratitude;
this *is* a day for acknowledging all that we owe to our mothers.

And we *also* give thanks for and celebrate
all those others who have played a similar role in our lives–
the people who have made us who we are,
the people who have taught us what love is,
the people who have helped us to know that we are loved,
whatever relation they may be to us –
the families we have *found*,
as well as the families from which we came.

And all of that gratitude and celebration,
though it may not be what this festival
was originally about, back in the earlier history of the church,
is what this day can and should be about for us, here and now.

And it is in *that* spirit that I wish you *all*
a happy Mothering Sunday.

Amen