

**Mothering Sunday,
Sunday, 14th March 2021**



Dear Friends,

‘And a sword will pierce your own soul, too.’ (Luke 2: 35)

Whilst at Romsey Abbey, I recall a conversation with a wonderful lady of 102 years young, who liked to be known as ‘Noo.’ She was a wily old bird, but stole my heart on first meeting. She lived on her own (with a phalanx of carers) in a small mews house in the town, along with a number of incredibly gorgeous but horribly smelly and flea-ridden cats, who were utterly adored by dear Noo. One used to have to restrict one’s breathing via the mouth whilst in the house because of the smell.

Before you raise your hands in horror that Noo had been left in this sort of squalor, let me assure you it was entirely of her choice! I recall that, ahead of her 100th birthday, a number of us spent a weekend scrubbing and cleaning and refreshing her home as our gift to her. She was FURIOUS, and with the exception of the letter from Her Majesty which Noo allowed us to frame for her, she was livid about the unwelcome sanitisation of her home. She was quite a character and I still miss her. On one memorable visit, I failed to reckon with her razor-sharp sense of humour as I asked whether she had any worries. ‘*No, dear,*’ she answered me, ‘*No, I don’t think I have ... Well, not now I’ve got my youngest son into a nursing home!*’ Lesson learned - yet, the truth in Noo’s words was that mothers of all ages never stop worrying about their children!



‘2020 Mothering Sunday flowers at St Mary’s Chilbolton’ by Jane Brown

This Sunday, is, of course, Mothering Sunday. Last year, as we came to this important Sunday in our Lenten observations, we were reeling with the shock of finding our churches locked by government decree because of a virus which was causing the fundamental precepts of all we held dear to be viciously upended. We held to the hope of this interruption to the pattern of our lives as being an uncomfortable *'one-off.'* Yet, here we are, preparing to celebrate our *second* Mothering Sunday with church doors closed against our gathering, and with the unimaginable death toll across our world from Coronavirus informing our need to stay at home and save lives.



'All Paths Lead to Illumination' by Charles Courtney Curran

It is impossible to celebrate Mothering Sunday without thinking about the children who make mothers what they are. The fourth Sunday in Lent has long been a time for a momentary celebration. Sometimes also known as *Refreshment Sunday* or *Laetare Sunday*, a medieval term which referred to the introit at the beginning of the Mass that included the words *'Rejoice ye with Jerusalem,'* meaning that worshippers could temporarily relax their Lenten fasting in anticipation of the Messiah entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday! Today stands out as the one day in Lent, which gets carried away with the celebratory rejoicing of Easter Day. Any old excuse to get to the chocolate early!!!

Our traditional Mothering Sunday festival dates back to the 16th Century, when there were very few holidays and children as young as 8 years of age would be sent to work away from home, in service. They would be given the middle Sunday of Lent off to visit their mothers and family. Young girls would bake, or be given a Simnel cake to take home with them, and as they walked home across the fields, they would pick violets and primroses to take home to their mothers and to the church. These traditional aspects of Mothering Sunday gave good cause for celebration - for those young children so cruelly separated from their mothers there was the fond remembrance of past kindness and tenderness and on the other hand the anticipation of joy, kindness and pleasure to come as they looked forward to being re-united with their loved ones again.

Nowadays, Mothering Sunday has become a day for Christians to give thanks for the care of the church; and to reflect on God's loving nature in all that His creation blesses us with. It is also a time to express thanks for our own mothers and to celebrate motherhood. Sadly, it has become overwhelmed by the American 'Mother's Day' which, in my opinion, is a confection of the greetings card industry!



'On the Terrace' by Pierre-Auguste Renoir

One of the hardest and yet most important things a mother can do is to let go ... and allow her child the freedom and space to grow and develop to find their own self-identity rooted in God; whether that is in their earthly lives or in their heavenly home. In our Christian life, we look to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as our ultimate role model for motherhood. Mary was a peasant girl in an oppressed country, and was probably only a teenager when she became the mother of Jesus. She was familiar with the ways of God and the history of her people, and was a model of wisdom and poise; a mother, who nurtured, protected, taught, disciplined and ultimately let go her son.

In Mary's story we hear she had a visit from an angel who told her she was going to have a baby. She was troubled - she wasn't married, but she pondered and prayed, and even though she was told the impossible, she believed! She was given the humiliation of a pregnancy, yet she saw herself as servant to the holy nature of God, and she accepted His will. She was obedient... self-disciplined and clear about her purpose and identity: a woman who knew who she was, and who had glimpsed a little of her destiny.

As scripture recounts, soon after Jesus was born, He was taken to the temple in Jerusalem, where the tradition was to present all new born infants to God. There Jesus' parents met Simeon, a devout man, who took the infant Messiah into his arms, praising the Lord and exclaiming how he had been living for this precise moment - when he would see the Saviour of the world with his own eyes. Then, he blessed Jesus' parents, and told Mary how a sword would pierce her own soul as her son's purpose came to its deadly fruition.



'Mary and Joseph leaving for Egypt' by @reverendally

Scripture tells us how: *'The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him'*. (John 2: 33) Imagine how proud and delighted Mary and Joseph would have been at old Simeon speaking of their first baby like that! Yet, how unprepared they must equally have been - Mary in particular, given Simeon's last sentence: *'And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'* This, of course, is not a reference to Jesus leaving the comfort of the carpenter's workshop and entering into His full-time ministry. Here is a veiled reference to the pain and horror of Good Friday. In the life of our Church we know how meaningless and hollow the festivities of Easter morning would be without the penitence and the painful solemnity of Good Friday afternoon.

Mary had a depth of love that ultimately would end in her letting go of her beloved child, Jesus, for, she knew He belonged to God. In turn, Jesus resembled His earthly mother, Mary, in some profound ways. He obeyed God unflinchingly. He accepted both humiliation and honour. Just as Mary endured the shame of her illicit pregnancy for the joy of being His mother, so Jesus endured the Cross for the joy that would follow for humanity across all time.

Simeon's predicted sword *did* pierce Mary's heart, but she stood by Jesus; witnessing the injustice and agony of His death, which enabled salvation and freedom for every person who turns to God through Him - salvation for you and for me and every Christian ever since.



'Image from The Crucifixion Triptych' by Rogier van der Weyden

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul calls us to a different sense of understanding about Mothering and family – he speaks of family that exists where we make it - whether in the Synagogue with Simeon and Anna or in the 'Upstairs Downstairs' lives of our 16th Century forbears, who drew together in service. Maybe Paul was speaking into the experience of our church family today, as we cleave to each other in the midst of pandemic restrictions.

St Paul calls us to become a radical family in the name of Jesus Christ, whatever our circumstances! He explains that *'family'* is not necessarily a given – not something that simply comes about by birth or by blood, or by tradition. *'Family'* often means hard work! It should mean support and love and mutuality - but it also means effort. Jesus recognized it; Mary recognised it; Simeon recognised it ... and so should we. Both in the relationships we have with our kin, and in the supportive, forgiving, loving relationships that should characterize our Church life.

In this unifying spirit on Mothering Sunday, we have the opportunity to re-clothe ourselves in the garments of forgiveness, patience, kindness, compassion, humility and gentleness and tie everything together with love. We have a Lenten chance to re-commit ourselves to being the loving, open community which Jesus longs us to be. Through Christ, we have the chance to respond to God calling us to abandon ourselves to His love!

Today, Mothering Sunday, is indeed a day for celebration - a momentary lifting from the austere days that lie ahead between now and Holy Week. It is a day to thank God, and to thank our earthly mothers for our nurturing, for our upbringing and the chances in life, which they have given for us, often sacrificially. And it is also a day, to learn from the example, both of their love and the continuing giving of Christ, even whilst He breathed His last breath on the cross.



'Breakfast in Bed' by Mary Cassatt

The 102 year old woman, Noo, of whom I spoke earlier in this letter, worried greatly with a primal love for her son! How much more, then does God, our heavenly parent, worry for us? Throughout our pilgrimage of faith, in both the good times and the bad, His love is with us. He doesn't promise us an easy life; nevertheless He *does* promise He will be with us.

On Mothering Sunday, remember God's loving care for you, His precious child! Remember that He delights in your being and shares in every one of your joys and your pain. Even in the depths of pandemic, when you might be feeling isolated from those you love, God is there by your side; in the personhood of Jesus Christ, embracing and strengthening you through the Holy Spirit on your journey of faith. And remember He will be with you until the end of time!

Yours, in the maternal embrace of Christ,

Jax

Rector, The Downs Benefice

Schedule of Services

After much prayer, and in response to the ongoing threat to public health of the new and virulent strain of COVID-19, our Benefice of five parishes has decided to suspend in-Church services until further notice in an attempt to model the Government's request of us all to stay at home and beat the spread of Coronavirus. Instead, our Benefice website has many links to a wide range of digital resources from across the Church of England and within our Diocese, including our own recorded services. You will find all these resources at: <http://downsbenefice.org/>

We hope we will be able to bring you a range of 'in person' worship during Holy Week and Easter Day – watch this space!

You will find a recorded **Service for Mothering Sunday** which is ready to view on our website. Please do watch it by going to: <http://downsbenefice.org/> and clicking on the video at the top of the home page.

This comes with my thanks to the many individuals and families who have contributed to this recording – all of whom are children, parents, siblings and beloved of God.



Collect Prayer for Mothering Sunday

God of compassion, whose Son Jesus Christ, the child of Mary,
shared the life of a home in Nazareth,
and on the cross drew the whole human family to himself:
strengthen us in our daily living,
that in joy and in sorrow we may know the power of your presence
to bind together and to heal;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God,

now and for ever. Amen.



'The Holy Family' by @reverendally

Luke 2: 33-35 – Jesus is Presented in the Temple

And the child's father and mother marvelled at what was being said about him.

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother, Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed - and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'