

## Service Transcript

### Mothering Sunday

*Service Leader: Steve Lineham*

*Speaker: Mark Reid*

#### **Call to worship Psalm 8**

O LORD, our Lord, your greatness is seen in all the world!

When I look at the sky, which you have made,  
at the moon and the stars, which you set in their places -  
what are human beings, that you think of them;  
mere mortals, that you care for them?

O LORD, our Lord, your greatness is seen in all the world!

#### **Mothering Sunday**

Today is Mothering Sunday – and I've found it's not mother's day, mother's day is different.  
Have a look at the origins of mothering Sunday?

Mothering Sunday always takes place on the fourth Sunday of Lent, exactly three weeks before Easter Sunday

Mothering Sunday is a celebration of mothers and the maternal bond, the early Christian date, known as Mothering Sunday, is the first clear recognition of the maternal bond, beginning as a religious occasion in the 16th century to give thanks to the Virgin Mary, or Mother Mary. The development of Christianity across Europe led to Mothering Sunday becoming an official calendar date, falling on the fourth Sunday of Lent.

Mothering Sunday became a day when children and young people, working as domestic servants, were granted a day off to visit their mothers and families. Reunions often took place within the "mother" churches.

Whereas Mother's Day originated in the U.S. American social activist Anna Jarvis, was behind the creation of Mother's Day, she lobbied the government for an official day. Eventually President Woodrow Wilson established the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day.

You can now be a know all and wag your finger and correct anyone who calls today mother's day. And mother's if you are friends with people in other countries you might well be able to have two special days.

A mother's desire is for justice and wellbeing for their children – but injustice and the slavery of children exist in many places in the world.

#### **Who is our mother?**

Psychologists say that the most important period in our lives are our early years. How we are nurtured in the first few years of life play an important part in the shaping of our lives through childhood and into adulthood. And the most important person in most people's lives in these formative years are our mothers.

I was drawn to this rather sharp quote from Oscar Wilde earlier this week *"All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his."*

Let's be more positive shall we? Here's what George Washington said about his mother: *"My mother was the most beautiful woman I ever saw. All I am I owe to my mother. I attribute my success in life to the moral, intellectual, and physical education I received from her."*

In becoming adopted parents, Rhiannon and I had children placed with us at 1 and 6 months of age and the social workers in charge of placement were very anxious to get the placement of Michael and Bethan carried out as early as possible, as the older they became, the more traumatic it would become for them, and the longer it would take for them to bond with us, their adoptive parents.

Good nurturing helps shape a child in their journey of growing up and then passing through adolescents into adulthood, and if something goes wrong with that process, then children can be left damaged and have issues they take into adulthood with them. Whether that is long term illness, trauma, family break-up, bullying, neglect, bad example or whatever, children can end up being unable to function properly emotionally or socially.

Each year we remind ourselves on this fourth Sunday in Lent, of our mothers, and give God thanks for them. We usually also take time to recognise that some had a poor experience of growing up, or who were nurtured by someone other than their own birth mother.

Now, I must admit that I am no expert on child development. I'm no expert on motherhood either for the simple reason that I'm a man! I always find it strange that, however we plan Mothering Sunday, we somehow always end up with either the Service Leader or the Speaker, or both being a man. My only qualification to knowing anything about motherhood is that I had a mother (obviously), and am married to a wife who's a mother to our children and I'm a grandfather to my daughter's children.

From one generation to the next, we older folk always comment on how much more difficult it is to nurture children in this day and age, don't we? That's what all the oldies were saying when we were young and trying to bring up our children. In every generation, the nurture of children is a challenge, that's why we need to celebrate it. And we need to pray. It has been said that there are few things more powerful than the prayers of a righteous parent. Here's a perceptive quote from former US President George W Bush: *"The bond between mothers and their children is one defined by love. As a mother's prayers for her children are unending, so are the wisdom, grace, and strength they provide to their children."* Parents need to pray, and others need to pray for parents!

Wind back a few hundred years and we find that mothering in the Middle Ages was just as difficult and complex as in our modern age and intellectuals of that time would compare it to the very work of God. Famously, Mother Julian of Norwich compared God to a mother. That claim wasn't without substance either. In Isaiah 66:13 it said this: *"I will comfort you there in Jerusalem as a mother comforts her child."*

However, a completely different angle on mothering and Christians developed right from the early centuries of the church. The precursor to Mothering Sunday was a celebration of what was known as Laetare on the fourth Sunday in Lent.. The word Laetare is Latin and it's a command: Rejoice! Laetare was Rejoice Sunday. What were they rejoicing about? It was for the Church

and being part of it. Particularly it celebrated the motherhood of the church and that's still so in the Roman Catholic Church today on this fourth Sunday in Lent. Here's a quote from Pope Francis in 2014: *"The Church is also mother because she cares for her children and guides us on the path of salvation,"*

Although we have happy with the idea of celebrating mothers on Mothering Sunday, Protestants down the ages have made much less of this idea of Mother Church because Catholics have connected in with it the notion of Mary as the Holy Mother, a theology which we reject as unscriptural. But do we throw out the baby with the bathwater? Is the church a mother, nurturing those who are a part of it?

Now remember that the church is the people not a building or organisation. The Bible uses metaphors to describe what things are like and in our series on the early church a few weeks ago we found the church being described using several metaphors: a temple, a holy nation, a body, the bride of Christ, an army, the family of God. In Acts 2:42-47 we saw how it was through the activity of the church that God added those who were being saved. There was a process of new birth, after which the new believers were nurtured as disciples as they became part of the fellowship worshipped together fellowshiped together served together and witnessed together. We saw how the church is a God idea – each of us are a part of the church universal and are part of a local church. So the concept of nurture is there, but is this picture of birth, nurture and growth seen as mothering in the NT? You've probably already realised that the nearest thing to it is found in Galatians 4, so let's take a look.

Galatians was written to churches in Asia Minor to counter a group we now call Judaisers who had infiltrated churches, telling Christians that if they wanted to worship and follow God that they needed to convert to Judaism; that just trusting and following Jesus wasn't enough and they needed to follow the Jewish laws and rituals.

Paul was emphatic that those coming to Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, were not obliged to obey the Jewish laws and rituals. In fact, in doing so, they were going against freedom that they had in Christ and enslaving themselves to a system of salvation through works. He uses an allegory of the mothers of Abraham's first two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. They had different mothers. Ishmael's was Hagar and Isaac's Sarah.

Abraham was promised a son through which God's promises to him were to be fulfilled. Abraham knew his wife Sarah was well beyond childbearing age and second-guessed God by taking Sarah's slave Hagar as a concubine and having a son, Ishmael through him. That was not what God intended and He showed through a miracle that his purposes were that Sarah was to give birth and she had the child of promise, Isaac.

Paul uses the story of the two mothers to say that Hagar stands for the Old Covenant. Let me read again what he wrote: *Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.* (Gal 4:25-26)

Paul compares those following the Jewish law to the slave woman Hagar and her children because they followed the law given at Sinai which at that time had its centre of worship in Jerusalem. They were slaves to a law that could never save them, only underline their sin and disobedience. He contrasts that to the children of Sarah, the free woman and her free children. Isaac was the

child of promise, born because God had graciously caused the miracle of his birth to happen. Those who are in Christ are children of promise and products of grace in the same way. We are free from sin, free from condemnation and free to be the people of God. In Paul's allegory, we are children of the free woman. Our worship is not focussed on an earthly place like the present Jerusalem, but above, where Christ is now. In verse 26, Paul says: *But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.* What is the Jerusalem above? That's clearer if we read Revelation 21:1-4

*Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death" or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'*

Here's a picture of the new Jerusalem, complete and finished. This picture from Revelation tells us of the new Jerusalem which is *prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.* It's a picture of the church – the bride of Christ. The presence of God is amongst His people in the new Jerusalem. That's a prophecy for the future but right now, the presence of God is amongst His people, the church; ones who are already citizens of Heaven in Christ. That's why we don't follow Jewish law and rituals. We are already part of that new Jerusalem which will find completeness when Christ returns. Let's go back to what Paul says: *the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.* His reference to mother here is still referring back to the allegory of Sarah freedom which fits into Paul's argument that we are free from the Law and its requirements.

So the description of the church as mother is a valid metaphor of church but a weak one when referring to motherhood in terms of nurture as it's more to do with freedom in Christ. That said, the church is where God has placed all His people to be nurtured and develop as His disciples. The care of the church isn't something delivered by "motherly" individuals but a collective responsibility that we all have to encourage one another in the faith as our Acts series showed. In that sense the church can be viewed as our mother but it is by no means a strong NT metaphor when compared to the Body of Christ. The motherhood of the church is something that's been developed down the ages rather than strongly rooted in the Bible.

Laetare was an opportunity to rejoice and give thanks for the church and what it should be to us and the idea of the motherhood of the church that morphed into Mothering Sunday as we heard earlier.

We should always rejoice that we are part of God's family through faith in Christ and in the body of Christ He has given us every resource to be nurtured and to grow into the people He wants us to be.

Whatever our experience of church, it is where God has put us as His children, and desires us to be part of a local church that is a safe, nurturing environment for us to grow and develop as His people.

If you are not part of a church, or remain on the periphery, then I would encourage you to draw yourself more closely to the fellowship because it is through being part of it that your faith will

continue to grow at whatever stage you are in. If not, you are in danger of being like a small child without proper nurture of its mother – troubled, confused, struggling, traumatised, dysfunctional, emotionally and spiritually compromised.

It is also a challenge to those of who are already part of the fellowship to ask ourselves whether we have the right environment to nurture disciples and to encourage the faith of each person who is part of it, so that the church fellowship collectively is a “mother” to each person. Let’s challenge ourselves with these things. Let’s pray.

Father, as we come before you this Mothering Sunday, we praise you afresh that for most of us, we have had a positive experience of motherhood, either as a son or daughter or as a parent. We are sad that there will be those amongst us or those listening to this video who’s experience of motherhood has been less than it should have been. Help them Lord to find peace and the strength by Your Spirit to move beyond where they are to be men and women who feel complete in You.

We thank you that as a loving Father, you have made us part of your family, part of the body of Christ and you desire us to be part of the local church because we need to be cared for, nurtured and encouraged to grow in our faith. Thank you for the mothering role that the church has in our lives. Help each of us, but particularly the leaders and others more mature in the faith to care for and encourage each in the fellowship, so we may set a positive example and not be a discouragement through words and actions that do not honour you.

We ask this in Jesus’ name  
Amen.

This is Rejoice! Sunday, so let’s do that by rejoicing that God has made us part of His family, the church that we may be drawn closer to Him and that we will encourage one another in the power of the Spirit to bring Him glory.

May God, who gave birth to all creation, bless us:  
may God, who became incarnate by an earthly mother, bless us:  
may God, who nurtures through His family, the Church bring us to maturity in Christ:  
May almighty God bless us, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
now and for ever.

**Amen.**