

A sermon given at St Stephen Walbrook on Thursday 31st March 2022
Lent 4/The week of Mothering Sunday
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Exodus 2.1-10/ John 19:25b-27

During the centenary of the First World War I tried to find out more about the lives of the men whose names were listed on the war memorial in the church I was attending at that time.

I discovered that two of them were sons of a celebrated Metropolitan Police detective, whose archive had been preserved at the Bishopsgate Institute. Alongside case notes, the papers contained personal correspondence sent by Frederick and Harold Wensley from the front line. This included letters and post cards to their mother and father, as well as memos to their commanding officer; each painting a very different picture of life in the trenches.

The reports to their commanders describe in cold, factual terms the mud, squalor, deafening noise and pitiful defences they found in the flooded trenches. There are no complaints, only concern for the welfare of sick and injured comrades. Motherly instincts piercing through the stiff upper lips of young men in the midst of the horrors of war.

The postcards they sent back home describe the weather and joke about the mild inconvenience of lost bags and belongings and the frequent misunderstandings that happened as a result of their attempts to communicate in French. The young men were keen to protect their parents from the situation in which they found themselves. But you probably didn't need to be an acclaimed detective to read between the lines and find glimpses of the suffering they were enduring. Like so many other parents, they eventually received a telegram from the King, informing them that their sons had been killed.

One of the most powerful pictures in the archive is a photograph of a man and a woman holding a bunch of flowers in what at first glance looks like a recently dug allotment. On closer inspection it becomes apparent that it is Mr & Mrs Wensley at the grave of one of their sons - standing, literally, in the shadow of the cross, the timber beams just visible in black and white. A single snapshot of a scene that must have been replicated millions of times by families on both sides of conflict.

While on placement as a hospital chaplain recently, I've had the privilege of being alongside people who were close to death.

One patient I met was wrestling with the dilemma of how and when to tell her children that she'd just received a terminal diagnosis. Like the postcards the Wensley boys sent home, her first instinct was not be the bearer of bad news; to keep the diagnosis to herself. But she also realised that her relationship with her sons was not one way; that she did want - perhaps even need - to share the news with them.

As a son, I felt that I would want to know if my mother had been given only a few months to live. But in the role of Chaplain I could not bring my own feelings to the fore. In any event - just as some people will not have had a perfect relationship with their mothers, I for one could never claim to have been the perfect son - so didn't feel remotely qualified to

advise based on personal experience! I hoped that my presence, listening as she worked through the options and asking probing questions when it seemed right to do so, might help her find the way to the foot of the cross, where, amidst all the emotions involved in coming to terms with her terminal diagnosis and in the presence of Christ, she would be reconciled with her sons.

Earlier this week, Inna Sovsun, a member of the Ukrainian Parliament described meeting a mother fleeing the devastated city of Mariupol. She had four children with her. One was her own child. Another was her niece, whose mother had left their shelter to find water but had disappeared. The third child had lived next door; their parents killed. As they were all running to board an evacuation bus, the woman saw a child sitting by the side of the road next to the bodies of his parents. In that frantic rush for safety and in shadow of death the words of Jesus on the cross came instinctively, in an instant: “Woman, here is your Son. Here is your Mother.” She picked him up and took him with her. They managed to find sanctuary in Hungary in the home of a volunteer host family.

Three portraits of people who found themselves at the foot of the cross; where different aspects of what it means to be mothering was revealed - and it's the place where the gospel takes us all today. The day the church celebrates Mothering Sunday.

Here, Jesus brings together his mother Mary and the Beloved Disciple, introducing them to each other as mother and son. In so doing he affirms that our understanding of ‘mothering’ goes far beyond the bounds of biology.

Just like the woman fleeing Mariupol – the “City of Mary” - with her four children. Or the Hungarian host family who welcomed them. Or the Pharoah's daughter who took in Moses - and as we were reminded in the Collect - the prayer at the start of this service - on the cross Jesus draws the whole human family to himself.

The words of Jesus “Woman, here is your son” and “Here is your mother” remind us that mothering is not a one-way street; as the patient in the hospital came to realise. Neither in its fullest expression is it a two way relationship between mother and child. At the foot of the cross we learn that mothering, like all our relationships, is sanctified and made complete through our relationship the one who draws us together; Jesus, the living Word who has the power to bind together and heal.

Standing alongside Mary the mother of Jesus, her sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene, we find Mr & Mrs Wensley in a field in northern France, countless others on both sides of wars past and present, and the millions who have lost loved ones through famine and disease. Here we learn in the extreme that that mothering – whether we are mothers who are parents, or mothers without children of our own, like the young men on the battlefield - involves suffering the pain of letting go. But that in the presence of the Christ, we find hope and strength.

Some people knock the church for not being inclusive enough. But perhaps today, when together we celebrate Mothering in all its fullness as revealed in the shadow of the cross, the church has got it right. Today we remember and give thanks for mothering in all its forms.

For mothers here today,
For mothers far away,
For mothers with children and those with none,
For mothers and children who are alone,
For mothers feeling blessed,
For mothers feeling stressed,
For mothers giving birth,
For the fruits of mother earth,
For mothers to whom we have much to say,
For mothers who will die today,
For mothers feeling homely,
For mothers who are lonely,
For mothers who are giving,
For mothers who are grieving,
For mothers who are tired,
For mothers who have inspired,
For mothers taken for granted,
For all the faithful departed,
For my mother and for yours,
We give thanks to you, O Lord.

Amen.