

Mothering Sunday 9th May 2021

The Bible is filled with many stories of mothering.

In Exodus we are told of a mother who was cunning, determined, desperate, protective and nurturing. (Jochebed – the mother of Moses)

In 1st Samuel we are told of a mother who was passionate, generous, sacrificial, brave, joyful, trusting and faithful. (Hannah – the mother of Samuel)

Luke tells us of a faithful, responsible mother who was aware of the double-edged sword of caring. (Mary – the mother of Jesus)

What about the woman who refused to take no for an answer from Jesus in Mark's gospel. (The woman from Syria Phoenicia – a non-Jew)

What about Jesus' own tears over Jerusalem as a mother weeps for her children, longing to gather them like a hen gathers her chicks. The list of characteristics associated with mothering grows ever longer and more diverse. Mothering is all those things and more.

Without someone to do those things for us; look out for our interests; defend us; protect us; someone to enable us to learn our purpose in life; to model trust, faith and joy for us; someone who will love us enough to let us go our own way; someone to take the risk of loving us, even knowing that love may bring them pain; someone to stand with us in our times of greatest suffering.

Without someone to do those things for us – we are missing something crucial. And if we ourselves have nobody for whom we can do these things, we are also missing out.

Let's widen our thoughts for today to the Family of God.

Families come in many shapes and sizes – and this was as true in Bible times as it is today. In Ancient times the family included a wide network of distant as well as more immediate relatives.

They were not only linked by their DNA but also by bonds of friendship, service, financial dependence and mutual concerns over territory as well as a shared faith.

It is only in more recent times where family comprises any combination, shape and size drawn together by commitments that do not necessarily just depend on promises made in public at a civil or religious ceremony.

Let's hear a story about some families found in the New Testament.

Power Point: Slide 1. Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus at Bethlehem.

A child born to an unmarried mother, watched over by a stepfather who later, according to the story, was surrounded by a number of stepbrothers and stepsisters. This was another of Jesus' experiences of family.

Slide 2. The boy Jesus surrounded by teachers in the temple and His mother Mary.

When Jesus was 12 years old, He went to the temple where He was surrounded by teachers and religious experts, asking questions and listening to the answers. He had come to the temple with His family and other village friends but had left them to find a new family of people eager to understand the ways of God.

When He was questioned by His distraught mother, all He could say was: “Didn’t you know I would be in My Father’s house?” Jesus’ understanding of the family He belonged to was already bigger than His home and the carpenter’s shop in Nazareth.

Slide 3. Jesus and the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus at Bethany.

There was once a family of two sisters and one brother, who made space for another friend to join them. He used to feel safe with them, in a family far from His home. It was Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus, in their home at Bethany, who welcomed Jesus. This was one of Jesus’ experiences of family.

Slide 4. Jesus surrounded by many people at Capernaum.

When Jesus grew up and began His work, His Nazareth family struggled to make sense of what was happening. They once tried to drag Him away from the crowds that had surrounded Him in a house.

Perhaps they thought He was being disloyal to them – even bringing shame upon them. But Jesus had to remind them that His idea of family was much bigger. He said: “Who is My mother and who are My brothers?” Then He looked at the people sitting around Him and said: “Here are My mother and My brothers. Anyone who obeys God is My brother or sister or mother.”

This is Jesus with His family of faith – a community that gathered around Him.

Slide 5. Jesus at the Last Supper table with His friends.

And what about the family gathered around a table in an upstairs room in the backstreets of Jerusalem? It is a family, who Jesus called friends, because He had told them everything that His Father had told Him – a family made up of trades people and accountants, wealthy women and some of a more dubious reputation, of mothers with their children, the sick, the lonely and the vulnerable. This too was family.

Slide 6. Jesus on the Cross with Mary and John

And on the cross, Jesus redefined family yet again. Talking to His youngest disciple, He says about Mary – she is now your mother. To Mary, He says – this man is now your son.

Slide 7. A gathering of people who are a household of faith.

After the resurrection, the first followers of “the way” became a startling new inclusive form of family, open to widows and strangers, men and women, those of different ethnic backgrounds, those with status and influence, and those from among the poorest of the poor.

No wonder the authorities were disturbed and suspicious about the way in which this new family was growing; at how family households of faith were coming together to worship God in gatherings that included a whole range of different ages and backgrounds, and young and old were rubbing shoulders together alongside the story of Jesus, which was being shared in words and symbols.

Slide 8. All images.

Whenever there are people of any age committed to each other in love, there is family. And the faith that grows in this sort of family is the sort of kingdom faith that Jesus talked about.

Which of these stories about family do you like the best?

Which of these stories do you feel is the most important?

Where are you in these stories?

What is our understanding of family in the church today?

If we think about mothering - who does all this for people who would otherwise never experience this kind of mothering?

So let's do a little activity. I would like to invite a couple of volunteers to draw an outline of the head of a person, the body, legs and 2 arms.

Then I would like invite anyone who feels comfortable to describe what mothering is like or the characteristics of someone who is in a mothering role. You can use words or images. Thus we will create a super-mum who could be male or female.

Let's take a look what has been written.

Wow, look at the many gifts of this one person. No one person is perfect at all these things and that is why we help each other out and share some of our responsibilities and that is why we look to God for help and not just to ourselves.

Which of these gifts could you offer to someone else and which gifts do you think you need help with?

We might think about our own lives – our experiences of mothering or of being mothered; remembering with thanksgiving the people who have done those things for us.

And perhaps we might also think of times when we have been failed by those who were supposed to care for us, or those times when we ourselves have failed.

If mothering were only done by mothers, it would be very hard indeed to ensure that everyone received the nurturing, the protection, the love, the sacrifice, the guidance that we need to become the people we are meant to be.

As a church community, we are called into a role of mothering that sometimes might need to be just as desperate, fierce, loyal, grieving as the mothers in today's scripture.

If we, as a church, truly love the community in which we are situated, just as God loves it and if we are to be God's holy people for God's needy world, then we will feel the pain of the world's suffering and we will be willing to sacrifice something of ourselves in order to bring to birth God's purposes for the world.

On the cross, God's love is nailed firmly to the world so as never to let it go – is our love for the world firmly fixed as this?

Are we this passionate about nurturing the world into becoming the place that God created it to be?

A truly parental love is one that would give anything and everything for the child.

This is the love of God that we see on the cross, but this is also the love that we are called to have for one another and for all of God's creation.

When we love like that, we make our Mothering-God visible to the world.

Poems and words - Richard

Activity: Flower blessings.

Hopefully all of you have received a paper flower outline. This is a simple centre circle with circle petals around it. We have pens available. What I would like you to do is write on your flower a simple blessing for those who care for you – it can be just one word.

So in the middle you right the name of that person and then on the petals what you want to say as a blessing to them.

When you have finished I want you to fold the petals into the centre to make the creases really nice and sharp.

Then bring them up here to this large tray with water in and gently lay the folder flowers (with the folded petals uppermost) on the surface of the water.

Watch as the water seeps into the paper and the petals magically unfold.

If you like on your way out you can take another flower home and use it as a tiny letter to someone you love but maybe don't often see.

Fold it like you have today and then give it or post it to the person and give them instructions on how to float it open.