

## Sermon for Mothering Sunday in a time of Corona virus, March 2020

I have never liked mothering Sunday day much. My mother, Ann, would say: 'Why show love and affection on just one day?'. But as she got older it became more important to her and so we would try to find some way of demonstrating our genuine affection and respect - without sentimentality and tackiness. You may recognise the problem!

But sadly, this year I don't have that problem. She died a fortnight ago. Last week my sisters and I spent a morning near Bridgewater weaving my mother's coffin. The willow wands had been cut and bleached and soaked so they were pale and pliable and together we wove an elegant, lidded basket. It was the last thing we could do for our mother.

And as we cleared out her house we found a beautiful black and white photo of her not yet 30, full of life and laughter as she showed off her new baby to the camera.

The completed coffin looked like a huge Moses basket. The popular, willow baby carriers are synonymous with cosiness and comfort. But when Moses' mother put her son into the first 'Moses basket' it was an act of desperation in a time of genocide. The flimsy papyrus basket could well have become his coffin had he been swept away in the Nile. Pharaoh had ordered all newborn Hebrew boys to be drowned in the Nile and the papyrus basket was a last resort. No one would bother to save him - except the woman who did save him, Pharaoh's daughter who showed compassion and courage. And not only was the baby saved, the mother was asked to become his nurse.

Looked at it that way, it's a heart-warming story - but for those who lived through it things must have looked grim.

Our own memories of motherhood, whether of being a mother or of being mothered may be equally patchy. Two years after that beautiful photo was taken, my mother was widowed, aged 30, pregnant with her third child. And that bereavement could have become the motif of her life - had she let it. Instead, like generations of bereaved parents before her, she threw herself courageously into making a family out of what was left to her - her children

Mothers know the suffering is the companion of love; mothers like, Moses' mother, who hid him in the Nile; Moses' new adopted mother, pharaoh's daughter who later had to bear the shame of her adopted son committing murder and escaping as a fugitive; Mary, who heard Simeon warn her, 'A sword will pierce your own soul, too.

Love lays us open to suffering. The more we love, the more we give hostages to fortune and the harder it is to carry on as we lose those we love.

As I say that, I am aware that in this pandemic we, and those around us are all in danger of losing loved ones.

But, says Paul, 'blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ .... who consoles us in all our affliction - so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we have been consoled by God.'

God, our consoling God, is Father and also mother. The courage and love mothers have is rooted in God. The patient belief in their children's abilities and future is rooted in the faithful love of God. Mothers are only able to love us because of the pre-existent, underlying love of God from which all love flows. The source of all love.

But mothers aren't perfect. Some of us will have difficult relationships with our mothers. Although it is true that everything honest, just, pure, and lovely flows from God, it is also true that there is damage and pain and anger in the world. Parents who have been damaged can themselves damage their children. Parents age, and as their minds change, we can lose the person we know and love. Viruses cross from birds or pigs or bats into human beings and infect individuals & countries. Is this part of the loving parenting of God? Where is God when this happens?

If we are blessed with insight and long life, we may find it possible to forgive our earthly parents their failures, as with time, we recognise our own failings. The more we understand that pain produces more pain and fear produces hate, the more we are able to love and forgive.

It's not the same with God. We don't understand much about God. But we do know that in the pain and suffering and isolation and for some, the sheer boredom of this epidemic, God is here with us. That is what the incarnation means. God is no longer 'up there' sending down plagues upon us (if he ever was, 'up there'). No, God is 'down here' with us, sharing the worry that there may not be enough food; the trepidation of a son or daughter isolated in London or in Barcelona; the dread that a life-changing operation may be postponed and beneath all that, the underlying fear of infection and death.

But as a mother suffers for her children, - remember, 'a sword will pierce your own soul too' - God shares in and understands our suffering even to the point of death.

Suffering is the price one pays for love, and the suffering of Jesus is the price God pays for love. As we try to perform tiny, daily acts of love and compassion and consolation, to relieve the suffering and isolation of others, we aren't alone. God isn't 'out there' but here with us, incarnate, suffering and loving as Father and as Mother.