**11th March 2018**

**John 3.14-21; Ephesians 2.1-10**

Mothering Sunday is an opportunity to give thanks for the enduring love of mothers. We recall how they have looked after us and helped us through all the scary moments of life. One little boy was however disappointed with his mother’s care once. It was a thunderstorm and his mother was putting him to bed. ‘Mummy, can I sleep with you tonight?’ asked the nervous boy. ‘I’m sorry darling’ said the mother. ‘But I have to sleep with daddy tonight’. ‘What!’ replied the boy. ‘Tell that big coward not to be such a baby!’

I guess we will all have different experiences of what a mother is and their love for us.

Sometimes we can take their love for granted:

One day a man came home from work to find total mayhem at home. The kids were outside still in their pyjamas playing in the muck. There were empty food boxes and wrappers all around the house, dishes stacked up everywhere, dog food spilled on the floor, a broken glass under the table. The living room was strewn with toys and various items of clothing, and a lamp had been knocked over... He headed upstairs to look for is wife, worried that she was ill or that something had happened to her... He found her in bed, still with her pyjamas on, reading a book. She looked up at him, smil3ed and asked how his day had been. He looked at her bewildered and asked ‘what happened here today?’ She again smiled and answered, ‘you know how everyday you come home from work and ask me what I did today but then don’t listen to what I say? Well, today I didn’t do it!’

Mothering Sunday originated from Medieval Christians celebrating the Mother Church and how the Christian faith has been passed down through the church helping people to find spiritual growth and strength to face the challenges in their life.

The Christian faith is about God’s love for us. On this day when we celebrate the baptism of Natalie we are reminded in this sacrament of God enduring love for us – which we shouldn’t take for granted but come to a deeper appreciation of it and how it can transform our lives. .

Baptism is fundamentally about (a) God’s generosity and grace to us and (b) our response to God - worked out in our response to each other. Baptism involves acknowledging the love of God - something that is simply offered and not something that can be claimed as a ‘right’. It marks us with the sign of the cross, the evidence of God’s identification with real humanity, living and suffering in the real world.

Easter is coming. The cross will be lifted high once more as a sign of healing that Jesus alluded to in our passage from John’s gospel. The sign of the cross is, I would say, the most powerful sign in the world.

If it was God in the flesh hung out to die on a cross on that first Good Friday, then the events of that weekend were the most earth shattering and life changing events of all time - because they involve the God who endures all time.

If Jesus was not God’s Son then it was just an heroic story of a good man who gave some inspiring teaching and died a tragic martyr’s death. If Jesus was who he said he was and who the disciples claimed him to be, then his death reveals God’s love for us and his resurrection from death says to us that there is a power at work in the world that can transform you and can bring you new life.

Even if you think this is all far-fetched and a load of wishful thinking, surely its worth investigating, checking out rather than just dismissing out of hand?

If a criminal can hang on the cross next to Jesus and with his dying breath plead for Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom and Jesus can reply ‘today you will be with me in paradise’ - there is hope for us all – especially those on their death bed. If Jesus can pray for those who crucify him ‘Father forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing’ – there is hope for us even with all the cruel and sinful things we get up to.

For Christians, these were crucial moments that conveyed the enduring love of God for the world.

John 3 verse 16 sums it all up, and if you want a passage that clearly expresses all that anyone needs to know to come to faith and understanding, then this is one of them. *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in may not perish but have eternal life.*

God so loved the world. We can think of all the evil and sin, corruption and violence in the world and it may be hard to believe that God can still love the world. Love has to persevere.

*Mothering love puts up with all our faults. A mother said to her young son, ‘every time you’re naughty I get another grey hair’. The boy replied ‘mummy, you must have been a terror when you were young … just look at Grandma!’*

*They say that motherhood is full of frustrations and challenges, but eventually they all move out.*

As we will discover as we, once again, journey towards the cross and Easter Day, the evil and sin, corruption and violence that nailed Jesus to the wood and lifted him high, didn’t stop him loving and forgiving nor suffering, nor feeling forsaken. Yet victory was his, when death was defeated. God’s love perseveres. *God so loved.*

The rest of this passage in Johns gospel speaks about judgement, people are either in the dark or in the light, living in truth or trying to hide for fear of exposure. Those who have something to hide, Jesus tells Nicodemus, stay in the darkness where it is easier to smuggle things away.

We acknowledge the truth of his words in our very language, talking of scandals 'coming to light' or being 'kept in the dark'. Which do you think dominates our public life in the UK: darkness or light? ‘The truth will set you free’ says Jesus. It may be painful facing the truth, especially if it is facing up to the grumbles, or to the reasons why someone is hurt or why they hurt someone. But there will always be something freeing about the truth, particularly when it is exposed in an atmosphere of understanding. Hence the saying here, ‘those who live by the truth come to the light’

The love of some mothers can be too understanding though. A mother was bravely gulping down some of the cake her young daughter had so thoughtfully baked as a ‘surprise’ for her birthday. After somehow managing to convey the idea, between laborious swallows that she was enjoying herself, the girl beamed, ‘I’m so glad you like it mummy. There should have been 35 candles on the cake but they were all gone when I took it out of the oven’. The truth can be painful but it usually helps understanding.

Baptism is primarily about what God does and not primarily about what we do. Paul writes in Ephesians ‘for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works (Eph 2.8). Once we realise it is God’s work we can only then respond with openness and gratitude.

But that response involves a public recognition that we are in need - and that is offensive to many people. Baptism involves saying I need to turn away from what is wrong and walk a new path – the path of Jesus - not with everything resolved, but in humility as one who has no illusions about my own fragility or need. It is that recognition that then characterises and shapes my relationships with and attitudes towards others.

So, baptism is not about ‘thinking I am better than anyone else’. Nor is it about buying an insurance policy from God. Nor does it depend on understanding the complete Christian faith. It is a gift and it is for God to sort out with each one of us. But, the key, I think, is in this: God does it - we simply respond to what God does. The rest is detail. Being spiritual is about being awake – being aware of the world around you, of others and of God and God’s call on your life, your new baptismal identity in Christ.

Your mother’s love may have been good. But no one is perfect. Your mother’s love may have been absent. God’s love can make up for those deficiencies in the love we get from fellow flawed human beings. Baptism declares to us that God loves us before we love God.

On this day of giving thanks for motherly love, we give thanks that in Christ nothing separates us from the love of God, a love that transforms and brings new life.

**Prayer for Mothering Sunday**Father God, on this Mothering Sunday we thank you for mothers the world over whose bounteous love cares and nurtures, guides and encourages; for lives that experience happiness and pain, but never cease to inspire or enthuse.

Lord, we see in this devotion a fragment of your unconditional love;
a love that led to the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus' death on a cross.

So we pray that you may give us the mother-like qualities of strength, courage and patience to face the challenges that we encounter this and every day.
**Amen.**