

## A SURPRISING JUNCTION

Exodus 2. 1-10

2 Corinthians 1. 3-7

Luke 2. 33-35

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

If you have recently tried to make a train journey in England on a Sunday, you will know that the British Rail timetable can be rather complicated. All those footnotes, small case letters in brackets, asterisks and stickers telling you that you will have to change your train at an unexpected station; and then, you discover that the train is delayed because of weekend engineering works; or you find that part of what was going to be a rail journey will have to be on a bus.

Such a journey on such a timetable can be very challenging. But there are times when the Church's timetable can be challenging too.

Today, we are at a surprising junction, when we mark the Fourth Sunday of Lent and Mothering Sunday. I call the junction 'surprising', because the combination of the joyful celebration of motherhood and the penitential austerity of Lent is not an easy or obvious connection.

I can offer what is at least the beginning of an explanation. Today on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, we actually celebrate Laetare Sunday. Laetare Sunday is meant to give us a bit of a break from the austere period of Lent. It is a day of celebration; and the liturgical colours for the day are not purple, but rose. Laetare Sunday gets its name from the first few words of the traditional introit for the Mass of the day. As you will notice in our weekly bulletin, the introit begins with the words, 'Rejoice

thee with Jerusalem...’; and the single imperative word for ‘rejoice’ in Latin is ‘Laetare’.<sup>1</sup>

If we think about Mothering Sunday, on the other hand, we may have forgotten that initially the day was not about mothers at all. As from the sixteenth century, Christians were encouraged on Mothering Sunday to return to the *Mother Church*, meaning either the place where one had been baptised, or to the Mother Church of the Diocese, which was the Cathedral. Over time, however, the focus moved away from the Church to human mothers, with the tradition of giving flowers on this day. The practice of giving flowers originated when domestic staff from large estates used to visit their mothers on their time off, after Mass; and they used to pick flowers from the hedgerows on the way before they went to see their mothers.

To come back to the idea of today being a surprising junction (when the Fourth Sunday of Lent coincides with Mothering Sunday), I recently read a quote from the Bishop of Durham which speaks into this curious connection. The Bishop wrote (and I quote), ‘The Lenten journey often has that strange counterpoint of two melodies that seem to be in different keys, struggling for resolution. Part of the discipline of Lent is to live with the message of the Kingdom, apparently clashing with the march to the Cross’.

The Bishop of Durham’s statement is certainly apt when we consider our appointed gospel reading for today. This passage, which we recognise as being part of a longer passage describing the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, could be described as ‘bittersweet’.

As it is Mothering Sunday, let us focus for a moment on the bittersweet emotions which may have run through the Blessed Virgin Mary’s heart. As she and Joseph

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<sup>1</sup> In Latin, the infinitive is ‘laetari’: to rejoice.

stood in the presence of Simeon, she must have felt pride and joy. Our text tells us that ‘the father and the mother of the child Jesus were amazed at what was being said about him’. Indeed, Simeon had just announced that our Lord was nothing less than the salvation of God, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to (his) people Israel’.

But Our Lady’s amazement must have turned to concern as she heard Simeon go on to say to her (and to her alone), ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too’.

These words were indeed prophetic, but deeply troubling words for a mother. They pointed to the Cross, and to perhaps one of the most moving moments of the crucifixion, when Christ looked down from the Cross at his mother. As St John’s gospel tells us, ‘When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman here is your son”. Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother”. And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home’.

That scene is one of the most poignant illustrations of maternal love, mingling with filial love, blessed by God’s love at a time of suffering. As she stood at the foot of the Cross, a sword was surely piercing Mary’s heart, just as Simeon had prophesied. And our Lord could not bear it. He then asked John to take Our Lady into his home from that hour and to look after her as if she were his own mother.

Yes, there is a bittersweet side to motherhood; just as there is real joy in motherhood.

Today on Mothering Sunday, some of us might not find motherhood to be an easy subject. We are not all mothers, and indeed we cannot all be mothers. But all of us

have had mothers. Nevertheless this relationship is one that is often bittersweet as well.

Some of us may wish that we still had our mothers with us; others of us may wish that our relationships with our mothers could have been less fraught or tense; and still others of us may not have known our mothers at all. Some of us may have longed to be mothers, but that wish was not fulfilled; and others of us did indeed have children, who brought us pride and joy, or perhaps disappointed us in some way.

We can now reflect again on the Bishop of Durham's words, which reminded us of that 'strange counterpoint of melodies that seem to be in different keys, struggling for resolution'.

On Laetare Sunday and on Mothering Sunday, we see that the theme of love, gratitude and obedience to God all run through those melodies; through the traditions that are celebrated today; and through our scripture readings.

These virtues of love, gratitude and obedience to God were personified by the Blessed Virgin Mary. Starting at the moment of the Annunciation, when she responded, 'Be it unto me according to thy word'; and continuing right through to the moment when she stood at that heart-breaking scene at the Cross, there was an unbroken line of loving obedience to God demonstrated by Mary, the Mother of the Church.

Her example sets the bar for us in Lent, and for us on Mothering Sunday. Her example shows us the way to proceed in all the rising and falling episodes of our lives; and in the painful, bittersweet and joyful times. If we love, honour and obey God with grateful hearts, we will be blessed by him. Amen.