

Lent 4 B Mothering Sunday St Stephen's 10.30am 14.3.21

Col 3: 12,13A Lk 2:35B

“As God’s chosen ones, holy & beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another.....”

Today is Mothering Sunday, and though most people think of this as a day for remembering our mothers, in fact it’s a day for saying thank you for the Church, which St Paul says is “Mother of us all”. So I’m going to think about our families – our human family and our church family – the first we joined when we were born, and the second when we were Baptised.

Family life can be difficult. A little girl from a refugee camp was adopted by a young couple. When they took her home they took her to her room, beautifully furnished and ready for her. They also introduced her to having a daily bath. Although not used to this, she took the daily scubbing and soaping without complaint; but after a week of this she’d had enough. That evening, covered in soapsuds she looked up at her new mother and said: “You people don’t want a little girl. What you want is a duck!” Learning to live together involves give and take and sensitivity.

Bringing up children is about training in many ways. One father spent an entire meal correcting his son’s table manners. He turned to his wife and said: “Will the training never end?” She replied: “A boy’s training never ends. He just marries and his wife gets the job. And please stop talking with food in your mouth!”

One of the most important things any parent can give to his or her children is time to listen. For all sorts of reasons life is busy and parents so easily get pre-occupied about their own concerns and the children lose out.

One mother heard Gypsy Smith preach and got it into her head the God was calling her to preach. So she wrote to Gypsy Smith telling him this, but saying that she had nine children and couldn’t see how she could carry out her calling.

Gypsy Smith wrote back: “Dear Madam, I’m delighted to hear that you have a call to preach. I am pleased to see that he has already provided you with a congregation. No minister has the opportunities than a parent of leading someone to Christ. Motherhood is a call of God to a spiritual task of the highest order, and it is important to remember this at those times when the demands of the family rule out all other forms of Christian service”

When we were baptised we became the children of God and, therefore, members of his family, the Church, and related to all other Christians by our baptism. John Calvin put it like this: “The Church is the gathering of God’s children, where they can be helped and fed like babies then, guided by her mother’s care, and grow to manhood in maturity of faith.” He went on to say: “The title ‘Mother’ underlines how essential it is to know the visible Church. There is no other way of entering into life.....”. St Cyprian said: “He cannot have God for his Father who has not the Church for his mother.”

The Church family has its problems. We're supposed to be forgiving and helpful to one another, and people have all sorts of ideas of how we ought to behave in church. At one service, a man noticed a little boy who was looking around and smiling at everyone. He wasn't disturbing anyone or being naughty. When his mother noticed, she shook him and said angrily: "Stop that grinning; you're in church." He started to cry and she said: "That's better," and went back to her prayers.

Yes, we can acknowledge the failing of the Church, which all too often are our failings, but let us also acknowledge the tremendous richness to our lives we receive, not only from our worship, but also in the fellowship of care, encouragement and friendship we give to each other.

It is, after all, the life of the Church which keeps our faith alive, which encourages us and nurtures us in faith and service. If you were to abolish the Church, the effect would be horrendous both for individuals and for society. One doesn't have to look much further than Mao's China, Pol Pot's Cambodia, Stalin's Russia or Hitler's Germany. Albert Einstein said: "Being a lover of freedom, when the (Nazi) revolution came to German, I looked to the Universities to defend it. But no! They were immediately silenced. Then I turned to the great editors, who in days gone by proclaimed their love of freedom, but they, too, were silenced in a few weeks. Only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler's campaign for the suppression of truth. What I once despised – the Church – I now praise the Church unreservedly.

All church congregations are made up of fallible human beings. Amid all those who work to build up the church's life, there are those who are like an appendix, no one notices them until they start to grumble. Some are like false teeth, sometimes in and sometimes out. And others are like tonsils, we hardly notice when they've gone.

Bob Girard has written: "The true nature of the church is relationship loving personal relationship with God and to each other as Christians and as human beings. If healthy loving relationships are lacking there is nothing to knit the church together around the Head. In effect there is no church."

It is relationships which are at the heart of family life, whether our human families or the church. As St Paul says in the first reading this morning, what marks out this life together is compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. And we have to keep in touch if relationships are to remain strong,

An elderly father's daughter was a successful lawyer who lived some 500 miles away. They hadn't seen each other in many months. So the father rang his daughter and asked her when she was going to visit him? She begins to tell him all the demands on her time, her court schedule, various meetings, on and on.

Her father replied: I've been wondering about this for some time now. When I die, do you intend to come to my funeral?" His daughter replied: "Dad! I can't believe you asked that. Of course I'd come to your funeral." He replied: "Good. Let's make a deal. Forget the funeral. I need you more now than I will then!"

Children are supposed to do all sorts of things for their mothers on Mothering Sunday. Years ago, many children worked in the big houses and were allowed to go home on Mothering Sunday to see their parents. On the way, they would pick a small bunch of flowers to give to their mothers. Which is why we like, if possible, to give the children a bunch of flowers to take to their mothers.

The older ones amongst us might well have sent our mothers a card. One man found for him the perfect one. It said: "Now that we have a mature adult relationship, there's something I'd like to tell you. You're still the first person I think of when I fall down or fail."

To close, one little boy was asked by the Vicar at a Mothers' Day Service: "Now, where do you go when you want anything, who do you go to?"

Expecting the answer "Mum", he was somewhat taken aback when the reply came "Sainsbury's".