

This isn't the sermon I would have preached if we had had a Mothering Sunday service. However, it seemed the right thing to be saying in the present circumstances.

Psalm 34:11-20 is one of the psalms set for Mothering Sunday

- ¹¹ Come, my children, and listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.
- ¹² Who is there who delights in life
and longs for days to enjoy good things?
- ¹³ Keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from lying words.
- ¹⁴ Turn from evil and do good;
seek peace and pursue it.
- ¹⁵ The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous
and his ears are open to their cry.
- ¹⁶ The face of the Lord is against those who do evil,
to root out the remembrance of them from the earth.
- ¹⁷ The righteous cry and the Lord hears them
and delivers them out of all their troubles.
- ¹⁸ The Lord is near to the brokenhearted
and will save those who are crushed in spirit.
- ¹⁹ Many are the troubles of the righteous;
from them all will the Lord deliver them.
- ²⁰ He keeps all their bones,
so that not one of them is broken.

Most experiences in life contain some mixed emotions. I remember taking my Uncle Jack's funeral. When I was talking to my aunt in preparation, she was adamant that I must include a funny story at his expense. He was a builder, and the story featured an entertaining encounter he had with a vicar when doing work at his church. As a new curate, being a clergyperson was now my profession, so it made it all the more amusing. Over the years since, I have known quite a few funerals to feature laughter in the midst of the tears. In the midst of the sadness of letting go, it affirms that the person we're remembering had a sense of humour, did and said funny things, and brought us joy.

Likewise, a happy event can have its poignant side. The birth of my first granddaughter Ava is an overwhelmingly happy thing, and every picture I see of her makes me smile. But every now and then I catch a glimpse of something in her face that is a hint of the granny she will never know, and I feel a slight twinge of sadness that she will never know Debbie, and that we can't share the experience of this new little person together. It doesn't last long, and it certainly doesn't spoil the joy, but I can't deny that the feeling is there.

And so it is with Mothering Sunday – almost universally called Mother's Day in the rest of the country. In the church, we might protest that it's really about mother church, the mothering attributes of God, or in more catholic traditions a chance to talk about the Virgin Mary. But for most people, it is about mothers, and the uncomfortable truth is that celebrating mothers and motherhood in a church service [or the wider community] is emotionally complicated.

It's tough on those who have lost their mothers. Those of us who are older may feel it less. For example, my mum was 80 when she died 10 years ago, she'd had a good life, and we were on good terms when it happened. It was a sudden shock when she died, but it has never made Mothering Sunday difficult for me, apart from a slightly odd feeling when I don't need to buy a card. And I'm old enough for it to be relatively normal not to have one or both parents still with us. But it's hard for those, who like my own children have lost their mum whilst still young, and are perhaps reminded not only of who they lost, but the times and celebrations that can no longer be shared.

Of course, losing a parent doesn't always mean that they have died. Over the years I have known a lot of people who have had difficult or problematic relationships with their mothers, or were effectively

abandoned by them. Some have even been abused by them. If we idealise motherhood in our Mothering Sunday celebrations in church, we risk alienating many who are present.

There are also those who have lost children, for whom the day might be a painful time, as they reflect on a child who has never been there to send a card or gift. And there are also women who have no children – either by choice, or infertility. Again, if we idealise the status of motherhood, what does that imply about those women who have not become mothers, or have lost their children?

From this you can see that planning worship for Mothering Sunday is not as straightforward as you might first think. How do we bring that complex mix of feelings to God? How do we worship Him, pray to Him, and learn from Him in a way that does at least some justice to everyone's feelings and expectations?

That's why I feel it is always important to acknowledge those difficulties that some people may have before going into anything more celebratory. The Christian community should be a place where that mix of emotions and experiences and stories can be brought and acknowledged together, and we should be able to do that without trampling on people's grief and sadness, and also without simply appearing to be spoilsports. God wants us to pray and worship with honesty, integrity, and with compassion for those around us.

One of the great things about the great book of poetry in the Old Testament that we call the Psalms is that it contains the whole spectrum of human emotions right up next to each other – often in the same psalm. There's love, hate, praise, penitence, anger, reassurance, peace, violence, desire for reconciliation, thanksgiving and more. Some psalms praise God in great adulation; others accuse God of being deaf and uncaring about His people. In this psalm you can see that range: the righteous, those who do evil and the brokenhearted are all mentioned. There's a recognition that life is hard, even for the faithful, although there is hope of ultimate deliverance.

Whatever state we are in, we need reminding of the emotions of others. It's perhaps more obvious that those who are caught up in joy and thanksgiving should be aware of and sensitive to the needs of those who are grieving and hurting. Perhaps less obvious is that sorrow and despair also needs challenging. I once heard a story about a group Jews in a Nazi concentration camp meeting behind one of the sheds and praising God. They couldn't possibly have done so in those circumstances as a result of any sense of happiness; the situation was so desperately bleak. Rather, it was suggested that this was more like protest. It meant facing fear, despair, sorrow and destruction and saying that their spirits would not be completely overwhelmed by it. Perhaps there are also times when we are brought low – usually in much less drastic and dramatic ways - when we need some encouragement to protest, and also be challenged by those who already do.

So on this strange COVID-19 Mothering Sunday when we cannot meet for a service of worship, maybe that's the thought to take away with us. Many of us will feel despair at the way our lives have become unrecognisable compared to what they were only 2 or 3 weeks ago. Perhaps some of us are feeling a complex mix of emotions because of the nature of today. Quite possibly some of us are separated from our mothers by geography or self-isolation, which would not have been factors a few weeks ago, and feel a new and different sense of loss: the loss of contact.

If we are brought low by all of this, it maybe that we need to protest with a song of praise. A song that defies the pressures and factors that bring us low and make us less than what we actually are. In defiance of a narrative that brings fear and shrinks our lives and world, perhaps the message of today is to praise, to marvel at the expanse of the universe and the diversity of creation, and to praise the God who is its source.

And if we are still in good spirits and feeling positive, perhaps we need to encourage and lift up (metaphorically and with no contact, of course) those around us, show compassion to those who are losing hope, and continue to hold out the hope that come what may, we are loved and valued by God, and He has not deserted us. As our ancient poet said in the psalm:

“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted
and will save those who are crushed in spirit.”