

Mothering Sunday Sunday 22nd March

1 Samuel 16: 1-13; John 9: 1-41

“The LORD does not look at the things human beings look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” (1 Sam. 16: 7)

This Sunday is Mothering Sunday and sadly, I cannot go and see my mother through fear of passing on the Corona virus. I probably will not be able to see her over Easter, either. There will be many children and mothers in the same position. Fortunately we live in an age where communication is possible by other means. Now is the time when we can show our care for those who have cared for us simply by keeping in regular contact.

Aside from recent events, Mothering Sunday is traditionally a time of thanksgiving for those who have loved and cared for us. In the run up to this day we are presented with glossy images of happy families presenting expensive gifts to carefree, well-dressed women in perfect make-up. Most of the mums I know would struggle to conform to this image, especially if they have to launch out of bed in time for the 8am BCP Communion.

What does the bible have to say about mothers?

Taking today's set passages, you might think they don't really say much about the tradition of Mothering Sunday. They do, however, say a lot about families in general – and about how to look and see.

The bible stories are not at pains to give us pictures of harmonious family life. Parental favouritism and sibling rivalry are in evidence from the start; Cain murders Abel, Jacob cons Esau out of his birthright and his blessing, Joseph is sold by his brothers to a passing caravan of slave traders. The children, however, are not helped by the parents; Rebekah encourages her favourite smooth-skinned son Jacob to deceive Isaac, and Jacob in turn favours and spoils Joseph, kindling the jealousy of his brothers. Jesse the father of David does not even consider inviting his youngest son to the sacrifice, but had relegated him to the fields to look after the sheep. Fortunately, God ignores parental decisions and assumptions.

In the New Testament reading the man born blind has reached adult maturity (he is of age) and is giving his defence of Jesus to the Pharisees. The Pharisees are desperate to prove there is something amiss with this healing miracle and are not content with the man's testimony, so they call in his parents. His parents pass the buck back to their Son; they are not manoeuvred into either siding with their Son or appeasing the Pharisees with false testimony. Their main goal was to avoid expulsion from the synagogue; divided loyalties were beginning to emerge.

But, the man's parents have done their parenting well. Their son has indeed come of age – he is able to speak the truth boldly despite cost to himself. He has psychologically and emotionally matured; he can make decisions apart from his parents. And he does this without dragging his parents any further into this argument or blaming them.

“I was blind but now I see!”

Jesus goes to find this man because he knows that the man has received more than his physical sight – he ‘sees’ him as Messiah.

Seeing things clearly – including ourselves – can be a sobering experience. An honest look at our relationships, including our relationships with those who have cared deeply for us, can reveal the odd crack and fissure which we like to paper over. The point is that we are human. Those who love us most are not perfect, as we are not perfect, but we still love them and thank God for them. The biblical picture of families is less than ideal, but the notion of family, and especially of family loyalty, goes much deeper than surface flaws and failings.

On one occasion, Jesus' family thought he was going mad; *“His family....went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’”* (Mark 3: 21) Some parents may well identify with this situation. But this is the occasion when Jesus redefines family. When told that his mother and brothers are looking for him, he asks: *‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’* He then asserts: *‘Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.’* (Mark 3: 33, 35). I wonder how Mary his mother took this statement?

Mothering Sunday is also a time to reflect on church as family. It is not a building (as we are now in a stark position to understand). Church is a group of unlikely people held together in Christ, coming together with all of our imperfections, quirks and gifts. At this very moment in time we need to realise that through Christ, we are bonded together and need to exercise our sense of belonging to one another and the ‘family care’ that should – in an ideal world – be the hallmark of our being.

Mandy