

Mothering Sunday overcoming prejudice

Today we
celebrate
Mothering
Sunday - over
the years it
has become
an occasion
for honouring
mothers and
giving them
presents,
although the
festival has
other origins,
and a rich
history.

During the
sixteenth
century,
people would
return to their
mother
church, the
main church
or cathedral
of the area, St
Boniface
being one, for
a service to
be held on
this 4th
Sunday of
Lent - and it
was a service
for great
rejoicing.
Anyone who
did this was
commonly
said to have
gone "a-
mothering".
In later times,
Mothering
Sunday
became a day

when domestic servants were given a day off to visit their mother church, usually with their own mothers and other family members. It was often the only time that whole families could gather together. The children would pick wild flowers along the way to place in the church or give to their mothers.

Other names attributed to this festival include Refreshment Sunday, Pudding Pie Sunday, Mid-Lent Sunday, Rose Sunday and Simnel Sunday. Simnel Sunday is named after the practice of baking Simnel cakes to celebrate the reuniting of families during the austerity of Lent... (please stay behind afterwards for

our very own
Simmel cake -
thanks to
Barbara!)

Another
tradition
associated
with
Mothering
Sunday is the
practice of
"clipping the
church",
whereby the
congregation
form a ring
around their
church
building and,
holding
hands,
embrace it.

And one final
bit of useless
information
for our
wedding
couples
gathered here
today, for
some
churches, it
became the
only day in
Lent when
marriages
could be
celebrated.
You'll be
pleased to
know, this is
not the case
at St
Boniface! We
look forward
to Tina and
Martin's
wedding in a
couple of
weeks..

So today is a
day for great
rejoicing, for
'a-mothering',
for returning
home, for
giving gifts
and for
feasting.

And all these
themes are
present in
today's gospel
reading: the
parable of the
prodigal son.

For Dickens,
this is not just
the greatest
story in the
Bible, but the
greatest story
ever told.
Along with the
Good
Samaritan, it
is surely
Jesus' most
famous
parable.

Jesus'
parables
nearly always
hinge on a
surprising
reversal of
some kind,
and a good
rule of thumb
when reading
them is that if
you haven't
found
anything
that's very
surprising and
challenging,
read it again.

May I suggest
there are
several
surprises in
store...

First of all, the
father.
Although the
parable is
commonly
known as the
prodigal son,
the main
protagonist is
the father,
and
throughout
this parable,
the father's
behaviour is
very strange.

If we jump to
the best bit,
the most
moving bit -
Fathers did
not run to
their children.
This is more
maternal
behaviour, as
is the kiss.
Here the
father
exposes
himself to
humiliation to
prevent his
son from
being
humiliated.
Not only had
the son
abandoned his
family, but he
would have
brought
shame to the
whole village.

So the father's behaviour is strange; it is not the way the male head of a household would act in Jesus' time. His running to meet his son is an expression of a love so strong that one is willing to cast one's dignity to the winds, to put aside one's power and position for the good of another.

The first listeners in the audience would have known that this kind of thing never happens, at least not in this world. Which is precisely the point. Jesus is introducing people to the relational logic of the kingdom of God that runs contrary to and way beyond the relational logic of this world.

And then
there is the
response of
the father to
the older son.
Let's not
forget the
older son. I
mean, he's
right, isn't he?
In almost
every possible
way, he's
right – about
his brother,
about himself,
about his
ridiculously
permissive
and forgiving
father. But,
sometimes we
have to
choose
between being
right and
being in
relationship.
The elder son,
too, ends up
in a "distant
country," this
one of his own
making as he
loses any
connection to
his brother,
his father, or
the others
rejoicing in
the new life
his brother
has been
given. I
suspect there
will be plenty
of times in life
when we
might have to
choose
between being
right and

being in
relationship?

The father's handling of the interchange with his older boy is parenting at its best, very maternal. He does not condemn the older brother. He quietly assures him of his concern and love for him as well as his younger brother. He tells him of the course of action he has chosen and leaves it up to him to decide on his own. We are left, at the end of the parable, not sure whether or not he will go into the banquet hall.

I wonder if any of you have seen Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son. It is beautiful.

Henri Nouwen reflects upon it:

The longer I look at 'the patriarch', the

clearer it becomes to me that Rembrandt has done something quite different from letting God pose as the wise old head of a family.

You see this most clearly in the hands. The two are quite different. The father's left hand touching the son's shoulder is strong and muscular. The fingers are spread out and cover a large part of the prodigal son's shoulder and back. I can see a certain pressure, especially in the thumb. That hand seems not only to touch, but, with its strength, also to hold. Even though there is a gentleness in the way the father's left hand touches his son, it is not without a firm grip.

How different
is the father's
right hand!
This hand
does not hold
or grasp. It is
refined, soft,
and very
tender. The
fingers are
close to each
other and
they have an
elegant
quality. It lies
gently upon
the son's
shoulder. It
wants to
caress, to
stroke, and to
offer
consolation
and comfort.
It is a
mother's
hand....

As soon as I
recognised
the difference
between the
two hands of
the father, a
new world of
meaning
opened up for
me. The
Father is not
simply a great
patriarch. He
is mother as
well as father.
He touches
the son with a
masculine
hand and a
feminine
hand. He
holds, and she
caresses. He

confirms and
she consoles.
He is, indeed,
God, in whom
both manhood
and
womanhood,
fatherhood
and
motherhood,
are fully
present. That
gentle and
caressing
right hand
echoes for me
the words of
the prophet
Isaiah: "Can a
woman forget
her baby at
the breast,
feel no pity
for the child
she has
borne? Even if
these were to
forget, I shall
not forget
you. Look, I
have
engraved you
on the palms
of my hands."

So, on
Mothering
Sunday, it is
right that we
are inspired
by this great
mothering
love of God.

But I don't
want us to
end there.

I want us to
reflect on how
we are to
grow in that

love, and
show that
love in our
relationships
with others,
and to help us
with this I'd
like to finish
with a
completely
different re-
reading of this
famous
parable:

God is
irresponsible.
Hopelessly so.

In the well-
worn parable
of the prodigal
son, it seems
Jesus is telling
us God can't
be bothered
to consider
the
consequences
of actions —
God's or those
of sinners.

God is
feckless.
Ridiculously
so.

This is the
Gospel of our
Lord.

Yet, to our
minds, God's
love,
demonstrated
in this
parable,
seems rather
immoral. It
doesn't sit
well with us.

It casts aside
right and
wrong. There
are no
consequences.
There are no
lessons to
learn.

God seems to
appear in this
story in the
role of the
doddering old
fool,
manipulated
by the half-
cooked
apology of the
prodigal son
to forget all
that has
passed. Not
only this, but
the father
ignores the
harm done to
the older son,
the one who
stayed home,
worked hard
and followed
the rules.

And the father
does harm the
older son. The
father's
indiscriminate
love for the
prodigal
wounds the
brother, as it
rightly would
us all.

But what if
God isn't the
father in this
story?

What if God
instead is the
prodigal who
seems so
irresponsible?
What if God is
the God who
comes to us in
the disguise of
those we
despise, those
who have
hated and
killed us,
rejected us
and
abandoned
us, those who
annoy and
frustrate us
most, those
who are
excluded?
What if God
comes to us
and
challenges us
to participate
in a radical,
and at times
irresponsible
hospitality
that turns the
rules of
engagement
upside-down.

And if God
comes to us
like this, how
will we
respond? As
the father
does,
subverting
social norms
and opening
our life to the
chaos the
prodigal
brings? Or as
the brother

does,
maintaining
our long-held
values but
closing
ourselves off
to loving the
Other?
In this
parable, I
wonder if
Jesus is
asking us
whether we
will entertain
angels, even if
the angels
look to us like
demons.

I wonder if
Jesus is
asking us
whether we
can overcome
our prejudice
to open our
arms enough
to embrace
the Other, the
other who is
actually our
kith and kin.

This story is
prefaced in
Luke with
concerns from
the religious
elite about the
company
Jesus kept at
table. This
wasn't a
matter of
simply
transgressing
social norms.
To the people
of the time,
the fellowship
you kept, who

you dined
with,
determined
who you
were. Because
Jesus ate with
the unclean,
the tax
collectors, the
prostitutes,
the worst of
the worst,
Jesus, too,
was the
unclean, the
tax collector,
the prostitute,
the worst of
the worst.
What if, Jesus
is the
prodigal?

He asks us
whether we
will accept
him, even if
he reeks of
what we think
is unwashed
sin.

He asks us
whether we
will embrace
him, unclean
and
unsavoury to
our tastes,
with the lavish
grace of a
banquet.

He asks us
whether we
will run out to
meet him
when we see
him lost,
alone,
bedraggled,
and abused;

whether we
will be eager
and expectant
to do the
irresponsible
thing of living
out the Good
News.

He asks us
whether we,
like the father
in the story,
have the
generosity to
accept him as
he appears;
or whether
we, like the
brother, will
demand that
God not be so
irresponsible
and insist that
God come to
us only in the
ways we find
acceptable.

May God bless
all our a-
mothering,
and all our
relationships,
God bless all
our giving and
our receiving
today, God
bless all our
home comings
and our
feasting. And
God bless this
mother church
- may it be a
place where
all are made
welcome and
all are made
whole.

Tim