**Exodus 2: 1-10; John 19: 25b - 27**

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Mothering Sunday, which is today, always presents problems for those of us called to preach. With the changing patterns of our world and society, the changes in the structure and nature of ‘family’, and the appalling misuse of power that has come from the concept of ‘Mother Church’, something which should be a relatively straightforward subject has become a bit of a minefield for us.

We cannot, with any integrity at all, pretend that families are the same as they were fifty, thirty, even ten years ago. Nor can we pretend that the Church has taken the responsibility it should have in caring for its members over the last many years. So perhaps today is a good chance to remind ourselves of what we should be thinking about, rather than pretending that everything is fine and listening to a nice bland sermon that affirms a no-longer-existent way of life.

So let’s begin at the beginning, with the Old Testament reading. It acknowledges that families clearly never have been straightforward. Moses’ mother recognises the danger to herself and to her son in a culture that is hostile to them, and is creative about finding an alternative to allowing her child to be murdered. The passage that we heard this morning offers what seems like a happy ending, with Moses being raised by his mother (posing as his wet nurse) and then taken in by Pharaoh’s daughter to be brought up a prince. And if that were it, it would indeed be a bit of a fairy-tale, but if we were to carry on reading, we would find out that Moses grows up and is thrown out of the royal court after murdering a slave-master whom he caught beating an Israelite slave. Not really a happy ending at all then.

But through this act, and through Moses’ later obedience to God, the people of Israel are finally brought out of slavery into the land promised to Abraham many generations before. God really does work in mysterious ways - and all that stemming from the actions of a mother who feared for her child’s life, a mother who was willing to do things a different way, and undoubtedly a dangerous way, in order that her son might live. We might relate this story to the tales of mothers who sent their children away during the war to places that they believed would be safer than staying at home…

And the message here is perhaps that we too should be imaginative in the way we think about families and relationships. It is a message that applies to all of us, not just those who are mothers in the narrowly-accepted sense. The Christian faith has always been concerned with issues of fidelity in relationships and the importance of the family, but it is we who have bound it up with the adoption of the nuclear family; the nuclear family – that hoary old model of mummy, daddy and 2.4 children - is a construct of our society, not our faith. It is no longer true anyway, and it certainly isn’t a model that we get from the Bible – Bible stories are full of concubines, multiple wives, extended families, families which are open to bringing in others and caring for them – anything but the nice tidy nuclear family.

Most important in any set of relationships is the affirmation of faithfulness – and the message should be that family exists wherever people are loving towards one another – which is one of the reasons why I am so keen on using the term ‘church family’ for the loose group of people who worship here, one way or another, Sunday by Sunday in loving faithfulness both to God and to each other.

Our society needs to re-embrace the extended, blended family, and the fact that the term ‘family’ should be open and inclusive, not some narrow unit of exclusivity. That way, we could properly affirm relationships that go beyond the regular perception of family, and simply see loving relationships of commitment and honesty between any two or more people.

While we continue to recognise marriage as a gift of God, at the same time we need to stop idealising marriage as the only way of expressing relationships and being family. We must affirm single people, those whose marriage has ended, either through death or divorce, and civil partnerships too. In the world in which we live, the Church has to be prophetic in speaking out in support of fidelity in any committed relationships, but also in support of all those who sit outside traditional frameworks.

Above all we must continue to grow as family within the church: to be a place where all are welcome – regardless of age, status, orientation, race, class or any of the other barriers we make to inclusiveness.
There is no room for judgmentalism, closed-mindedness, exclusivity or arrogance in the Biblical model of the Church. God calls us to be loving, open, forgiving – Judgement is His and His alone to make, and we must take this seriously and seek to be loving, open and forgiving, because, when we are, then people will want to be a part of the Church family.

We have another example of Biblical family love and support in that short, but poignant Gospel reading for today. We hear Jesus’ words at the scene of his Crucifixion, as he turns to his mother and says of the beloved disciple ‘here is your son’ and to the disciple ‘here is your mother.’

It is striking for two reasons: firstly, because even through his agony, Jesus seeks to comfort his mother and one of his closest friends by founding a relationship of mutual dependence between them. And secondly because there is again another statement about family: that family exists where we make it. It is not a given, nor yet something that comes about purely by birth, or blood, or tradition. Family comes with mutual support and love, but it also implies effort. Nothing worthwhile is ever truly easy. Jesus recognized that, and so should we. Both in the relationships we have with our flesh and blood, and in the supportive, forgiving, loving relationships that should characterize our Church life.

And so this Mothering Sunday let us recommit ourselves to being the loving, open community that we should be. So that we can once more use the term ‘Mother Church’ without irony, and create a community that affirms and welcomes those both within and outside traditional models of relationship. Happy Mothering Sunday to you all, whatever your calling.

**Amen**