Mothering Sunday 8am

**Exodus 2.1-10**

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. ‘This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,’ she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, ‘Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?’ Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, ‘Yes.’ So the girl went and called the child’s mother. Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, ‘Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.’ So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, ‘because’, she said, ‘I drew him out of the water.’

**John 19.25-27**

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

My mother is fond of telling a story about me from when I was around 7 years old, and someone asked what I wanted to be when I grew up. Apparently (I have no memory of this!) I thought for a while and said I might want to be a musician, or maybe write stories, “or I might just be an ordinary woman like you, Mummy.” As you can probably imagine, my mother didn’t take that as a compliment - she’s never been one to follow the crowd, and she’s certainly far from ordinary. What I meant, I imagine, was that she didn’t at that time go out to work, so she didn’t have a job title. She was just Mummy, doing what mummies do.

Fast-forward 25 years to when I had my own children, and of course my mother had the last laugh, as I discovered that of the two, going out to work definitely seemed like the easy option. It’s hard to describe the range of skills required to be a good parent, but high on the list must be the ability to be endlessly patient and resourceful, even in the face of chronic sleep-deprivation. I’m told by people further on the journey than myself that you never stop worrying about your children, even when they are grown up and gone. A baby is for life, not just till voting age. Parenthood calls for reserves of love, resilience and wisdom that stretch most of us to our limits.

Of course, parenting now is very different from when I grew up in the 1970s. Lots more mothers go out to work, and parents take a more equal share of the caring responsibilities. Grandparents, childminders and nurseries, or a network of all of these, are often an integral part of childcare arrangements. And family structures themselves are more fluid – with step parents and blended families often playing significant roles.

But perhaps this isn’t as new as we think. If we look back to our first reading (a story from around three and a half thousand years ago), we see baby Moses being passed around like a parcel. Moses was born into a Hebrew family in Egypt, at a time when the ruler, Pharaoh, had decided that the Hebrew minority was becoming dangerously large. His answer: ethnic cleansing. All boy babies were to be drowned in the Nile, leaving only girls who would have no option but to intermarry with Egyptians. It was something of a miracle then, that Moses survived, but a miracle made possible by the actions of three pivotal women.

First there’s his mother. She gave birth to him, and in a poignant detail we hear that she saw that he was a fine boy. Like God in the first days of creation, surveying all that he had made and seeing that it was good, she rejoiced in her child; and she did what she could to nurture and protect him. But she could not keep him safe forever. Hiding him in the reeds by the river was an act of desperation, but perhaps also a sign of hope that someone, somehow, would save him.

Enter the second significant woman: Pharaoh’s daughter. She knew Moses was a Hebrew boy, condemned to death, but his defencelessness aroused her pity and moved her to rescue him. She took charge of his care, eventually adopting him as her own son. That act of generosity from a stranger allowed this one young man to grow up in safety – and changed the history of the Hebrew people.

And the third vital woman in the story is Moses’ sister, hovering nearby to see what would happen to him. By her quick thinking she ensured that he would keep his links to his birth family, and perhaps grow up with some understanding of their faith and traditions. She watched over the baby in his moment of danger, revealing herself at some personal risk to Pharaoh’s daughter, and offering a practical solution to the question of his care. Her creative intervention united the compassion of the princess to the loving commitment of Moses’ mother.

In one way or another, each of these three women acted as a mother to the child Moses. It’s interesting how our language differentiates between fathering (the one-off act which begins a child’s life) and mothering – the long-term process of bringing up that child. The church celebrates this Sunday as Mothering Sunday, and that’s not just because it has a taste for archaic terminology. There’s a deeper point to be made about how mothering as a verb is something for all of us. Of course it’s great to have an opportunity to remember our own mothers and appreciate (as I obviously didn’t!) what they do for us. But it also gives us the chance to think of the many other people who have “mothered” us along the way: teachers, friends, mentors – and of course fathers too. We are fortunate, I think, to live in a time when gender roles are becoming less rigid, and men as well as women are encouraged to show their caring side.

And today reminds us that we all have a mothering role, whether or not we have children of our own. The qualities of commitment, compassion and creativity that the three women displayed in Moses’ story are ones that every community needs in order to thrive. We devalue them, and limit ourselves, if we think they are only for women to show to their children.

We know this because these are the very qualities that God demonstrates to us. We’re used to referring to God as our Father, but the bible reminds us that he is like a mother to us as well. “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you,” says God, in Isaiah 66. In our gospel reading today we heard Jesus on the cross, close to death, making it his business to provide for the physical and emotional needs of his own mother and his friend. He put aside his own pain in order to offer a thoughtful, practical solution to their grief. It’s a gesture full of the imaginative generosity that characterises the best of mothering.

If we look back at our three women from Exodus we can see in their actions an echo of God himself. We often speak of the Trinity as three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But another set of images focuses on God’s relationships with us: as Creator, giving us life and rejoicing in what we are; as Redeemer, rescuing us and offering us adoption into God’s family; as Sustainer, providing for our needs and speaking for us when we don’t have the words to speak for ourselves. “Almighty God,” says the General Thanksgiving, “we bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ.” Here in the story of Moses is a picture of that love in miniature, played out through the actions of three individual women who cared about a baby.

So mothering goes far beyond biology – or even childcare. It’s a role we are all called to as Christians. “Imitate God, since you are the children he loves,” says St Paul. Mothering is not just for mothers, it’s for fathers, and grandparents, and friends, and for all of us who want to walk more closely in the steps of Jesus. As we celebrate our own mothers this Mothers’ Day, may we also be inspired to respond with love, generosity and imagination to those around us.