

Coronavirus Pandemic: Thought for the Week 21.3.20, by Mark Eminson

Here we are, brothers and sisters, in these unprecedented times, on the eve of a very untypical Mothering Sunday: no church services, no meals out or large family gatherings.

Perhaps with the resourcefulness of a mother, the Church of England is adapting. I commend to you a service led by the Archbishop of Canterbury (our Mother Church) across BBC radio tomorrow morning at 8, then available online from 9.00am. In the Merton Priory Team, those of you who can access our websites, can listen to me leading prayers from Holy Trinity tomorrow; while here I am on a video courtesy of YouTube and Elise, but all brave new ground for someone decidedly non-techie! All of these audio or visual means of communication that we will be trialling in these weeks will also be available as hard copies in our churches or through your door. As your local Mother Church we want to embrace you as our own.

Mothering Sunday can always be a day of mixed emotions: some have lost mothers recently or the pain is still raw; some have a difficult experience of the mother-child relationship; some would love to be a mother, but it hasn't worked out. Others have much to be thankful for and wish to express their love and gratitude in flowers and hymns, in cards, presents, food and drink. The Mothering Sunday service holds all of these contrasting experiences and feelings because, of course (as no doubt you have heard the preacher say time and again!), holy Church is the Mother of us all.

But this year we are bereft of holy Church. Or are we? We are not there in body, but what about in Spirit? If I think of my own mother; at 40, I do not live with her, but have I ceased thereby to be her son? Do I love her any the less? Perhaps I appreciate her all the more as I have got older and have had my own children and our relationship has matured and deepened. And also I look back with some shame at the extent to which I took for granted her being-there and providing for all my daily needs. By analogy have I taken for granted worshipping in church, the sacrament of the eucharist, hymns and fellowship? Might, by God's grace, this strange period of physical separation be an opportunity for profound spiritual connection?

Mother Church, Mother God, Jesus our Mother have no bounds or limitations and hold us all at this time. I love the maternal imagery and the message of what feels an appropriate song for this time, from St Anselm of Canterbury:

Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you;
you are gentle with us as a mother with her children.
Often you weep over our sins and our pride,
tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement.
You comfort us in sorrow and bind up our wounds,
in sickness you nurse us, and with pure milk you feed us.
Jesus, by your dying we are born to new life;
by your anguish and labour we come forth in joy.
Despair turns to hope through your sweet goodness;
through your gentleness we find comfort in fear.
Your warmth gives life to the dead,
your touch makes sinners righteous.
Lord Jesus, in your mercy heal us;
in your love and tenderness remake us.
In your compassion bring grace and forgiveness,
for the beauty of heaven may your love prepare us.