

Lent 4 / Mothering Sunday 15th March 2026

Well here we are midway through Lent – three Sundays behind us and three more until the joy of Easter, so in the Catholic Church today is known as Laetare Sunday. Laetare is the Latin word for rejoice. In parts of the Anglican world it's often known as Refreshment Sunday.

Whatever you know it as, it is perhaps an invitation to loosen the reins of our self-denying choices that we make for Lent, in other words allow ourselves a glass of something alcoholic or even a chocolate biscuit or a slice of cake, if those are the sorts of things you have sworn. Today is even more a Feast Day than any other Sunday in Lent.

But of course it is also Mothering Sunday, which always falls on the fourth Sunday of Lent, unlike the even more commercial Mother's Day, which is generally celebrated in the rest of the world in May.

Unlike Mother's Day, Mothering Sunday, as I'm sure you've heard me say before, has Christian roots. It was the day when servants and the like were given the day off to return to their mother church. Our mother church is of course St Mary's Cathedral so I am grateful that you are here today rather than having gone to worship at the cathedral!

But times move on, and in most people's minds today is associated with motherhood. Now most people are lucky enough to have had good mothers, but a minority have not and for them today is difficult, as it can prompt bad memories. For some today is about grieving, in some cases the loss of their own mother, and for others, who are mothers themselves, the loss of a child of any age or even a grandchild. And of course there are those who wanted to become mothers and for whom it has never happened.

Each year in the Scottish Episcopal Church we are offered the same two sets of readings, and what continues to surprise me about both the two Old Testament and the two Gospel readings is that none of them presents the joyful side of motherhood.

In fact both Old Testament readings focus on adoption, as does the Gospel reading I opted for today, while in the alternative Gospel reading Simeon accurately tells Mary that Jesus' life will result in a sword piercing her soul.

In the Old Testament passage that xx has just read, Hannah has been so desperate to have a child that when she finally does she effectively hands Samuel over to Eli and the Temple for adoption so that he can serve God, her thank you to God for giving her a child. Whatever the short-term pain for Hannah, long-term it was a really good thing to do, because both Eli's sons were basically scoundrels who were unfit to succeed him as priest.

Before Samuel named Saul as Israel's first king, he was effectively the spiritual, political, legal and military head of Israel rolled into one – enough to make any mother proud beyond belief. But it came at a high price. As far as one can tell, Hannah's contact with Samuel was limited to once a year when she went to the Temple with a new outfit to replace the one he had grown out of.

In the other Old Testament reading, from Exodus, we would have read about Moses being effectively adopted by Pharaoh's daughter as a part of a stratagem to stop him being killed like other Hebrew male babies. Thanks to a bit of nifty footwork on his sister Miriam's part, Jochebed his mother, is hired as his nursemaid until Moses was old enough to be formally adopted. Pharaoh's daughter was taking quite a risk in doing so, because her father would likely have had her killed had he realised who Moses really was.

And of course we have the Gospel reading, where Jesus tells Mary to adopt the beloved disciple as her son and vice versa. This should not be seen as some sort of afterthought, but rather as part of the plan from the beginning. Once that last, and important task had been done, Jesus spoke his last words. It is finished. In other words, Jesus had completed everything he had come to earth to do.

The Old Testament in particular is absolutely littered with commands and exhortations to look after widows who were often left destitute with no obvious means of support when their husbands died. And Jesus' command to the disciple from the cross to look after Mary was totally consistent with that tradition. In some ways you could say that his final act of care was really quite old-fashioned, but actually we have seen evidence of that embodied down the centuries in Christian care for the vulnerable – from things like almshouses to healthcare and education.

Both Mary and Jochebed took huge risks to make their sons safe. There's a certain irony, isn't there, in Moses' effective grandfather being the very man who would have killed his adopted grandson had he known who he really was. And it was to Egypt that Mary fled as a refugee so that Herod could not find Jesus in order to have him killed.

And we only have to look at the world around us today to see the huge risks mothers have been taking in places like Ukraine, Iran and the Middle East generally to protect their children from the ravages of war. Motherhood is a risky business, and for all the joy it brings, it also brings plenty of heartache.

The reason I wanted to draw attention to the strong element of adoption in the readings, is because what Paul has to say about adoption in his various epistles.

In Romans Chapter 8 Paul tells his audience The Spirit you received does not make you slaves....rather the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.

In Galatians Chapter 4, he writes But when the set time had fully come God sent his Son, born of a woman....to redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption to sonship. In Ephesians 1 he says He (God) predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ.

Leaving aside Paul's very one-eyed gendering, he makes it clear that we have all been adopted as God's children and that has been God's purpose from Day 1. Moses and Samuel and the beloved disciple weren't adopted because they were more special than us. They were adopted because that was what was needed in those particular circumstances. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that being an adoptive parent can be even more courageous than being an biological parent.

Another point that I think is important, is that these readings honour the women at the centre of them as women, not just as mothers. There were three other women along with Mary witnessing the crucifixion. Indeed, John's is the only Gospel that even mentions a male disciple being present at the crucifixion – which says a lot about the courage of women, I would suggest.

Hannah put her desire to honour God above her desire to keep Samuel close by her, and in the Exodus story, Pharaoh's daughter took an enormous risk for someone who was not a biological mother. These things are important to remember on a day when it can often seem that motherhood is the be all and end all for women.

What we also have to remember, particularly today, is that we are all made in the image of God. If that's the case then God is motherly as well as fatherly. Jesus compares himself to a mother hen, while Psalm

23 talks about God 'preparing a table' for the psalmist, at a cultural time when hospitality was definitely the domain of women.

The conclusion to be drawn from that is we all, men and women alike, are called to be motherly , or indeed fatherly, at the appropriate moment. But note that on the Cross Jesus doesn't give his mother or the beloved disciple a choice as to when might be an appropriate moment. Rather, he sets a high standard of love that we need to emulate as best we can whatever the circumstances.