

This Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Lent is also Mothering Sunday. As it would be a big shame to focus on it entirely with our scheduled Gospel reading being Jesus' great parable of the Prodigal Son (which is read on Sunday only once every three years), I thought I would this week offer a Lenten reflection for Mothering Sunday.

It is always good to hear British TV broadcasters just occasionally using the proper name for this Sunday, instead of the imported 'Mothers' Day.'

Mothers' Day is an American invention and tradition, also followed by Canada and Australia. It has a completely different history to the British Mothering Sunday. Its origins are noble enough. The idea of a special day for mothers grew out of the suffering of so many of them in America when their children, soldiers and others, were killed in the Civil War. Mothers' Day Work Clubs were formed as a reaction, to support the grieving women. A feminist activist called Anna Jarvis organised a campaign, asking for a national holiday to celebrate the lives of all mothers.

They settled on the second Sunday in May. But Anna was horrified to see how it quickly became commercialized. It was good that people should buy their mothers a present, but there was no need to spend as much on it as the advertisers encouraged them to. As for the shops that wanted their customers to buy an expensive card to send, Anna said, 'A printed card means nothing, except that you are too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone in the world.' She then spent all her money campaigning against the travesty which her vision of Mother's Day had become.

Mothering Sunday had developed in the British Isles centuries before the American Mothers' Day. It was originally the Sunday nearest 'Lady Day,' the common name for the Feast of the Annunciation of our Lord to the Blessed Virgin Mary, which is celebrated today (Friday), 25th March. This Sunday, conveniently, is the Sunday nearest Lady Day, although long ago Mothering Sunday became fixed on the fourth Sunday of Lent regardless of the date.

The Lenten fast was taken seriously in the old days, and many people ate very little in the days between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. But on this fourth Sunday, mid-Lent (more or less), or Refreshment Sunday, as it was also called, a little let-up was permitted. Many apprentices and young workers who lived

with their employers to learn a trade were allowed to go home on this day. So were many live-in domestic servants. They had little money, so they stopped on their way to gather flowers from the wayside to give to their mothers as a thank-you present when they reached home. Mid-Lent Sunday or Lady Day itself was also the time when many people from outlying parishes would travel to their cathedral, the 'mother church' of the diocese, and celebrate and give thanks for Mary and her call to be the mother of Jesus, and in a special way, mother of the Church.

So Mothering Sunday is a reminder of an older, homespun era when simple things were best, and a demonstration of love was more important than the materialistic obsessions of our own times. As on Mothering Sunday we give thanks for our own mothers, we have also to remember the situations where thoughts of mother or motherhood are not happy ones. Many will recall their mothers who have departed this life, perhaps tragically or while still young, and they still grieve. There are those who are not mothers but would dearly love to be. Some have mothers who never loved them, maybe who abandoned or abused them.

We must also use Mothering Sunday to give thanks for *all* who nurtured us, gave us a life and support and encouragement to become who we are, whether they are family or not.

Some single parents are fathers bringing up their children alone. They have to be mother too. Not easy.

Coming in Lent, the most appropriate Gospel passage for Mothering Sunday, if it is the main focus of the day, is the story of Mary at the cross (John 19: 25 – 27). Certainly, it is an appropriate text for those who have lost children, the experience that inspired Anna Jarvis to work for the support of those grieving mothers of the victims of war. It is to such as these that it speaks most of all. It is an experience that remains all too common, not least in Ukraine and Russia today.

This is a special scene in the Passion story. It reminds us that love inevitably involves suffering, because when we live unselfishly and others are the focus of our lives, their sufferings as well as their joys become ours too. And here we can be reassured that even the mother of all mothers, the handmaid of God

who brought the Saviour into the world, also knew the tragedy, the heartbreak of the cruel loss of her child.

We know, of course, that the story does not end with the cross. It ends with life. We have the advantage of reading it from the resurrection side of Easter. In Christ, we can know that God will raise us from despair and death, both in this life and beyond it. The cross is the ultimate symbol of the love of God for us all, a love that has no limits.

In motherhood at its best, we can experience something of God's incredible and unfailing love. And our response must be that as members of Mother Church, called to bear Christ in our lives, we have a special ministry of care and kindness, of nurture and encouragement, and yes, of mothering, to one another. Let us accept it and live it as we give thanks for all that the word 'mother' means for us.

A prayer for Mothering Sunday, the alternative Collect for Lent 4:

God of compassion, whose Son Jesus Christ, the child of Mary, shared the life of a home in Nazareth, and on the cross drew the whole human family to himself: strengthen us in our daily living that in joy and in sorrow we may know the power of your presence to bind together and to heal; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.