

Followers of the Way

Mothering Sunday – Mercy

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Genesis 1: 20-28; Isaiah 49: 14-18

A very happy Mothering Sunday to all mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers. And to children of all ages, because one of the few constants in life is that we all of us begin with a mother. This may change, of course, if scientists get their way and succeed in growing babies, from conception through to birth, in a lab, but at the moment the need for a mother is irrefutable reality. Male same-sex couples, using their own sperm, may have children – but those children still need a mother, and, despite our attempted reorchestration of creation, the perhaps uncomfortable truth for some is that biology can't be avoided. And I think it's arguable that, if scientists do achieve their end, and mothers become redundant, that could well be our Babel moment.

But why should children need a mother and a father? Why has God made us this way? After all, things would be a lot easier if children somehow just spontaneously generated, and if they didn't then need years of looking after. As it is, biologically a child needs two parents, a mother and a father, but on top of that, when they're first born, they're totally dependent – they can't even sit up, let alone walk, for months, nor can they feed themselves. Even the Son of God, when He took on flesh, had to go through this process – so what's God saying to us in this? In particular, what's he saying to us through mothers?

Genesis 1:26, God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...'. This is important, because, even before our creation, God announces that humankind is going to be special – we're going to be a reflection – an image – of Himself. Now that's incredible, when you think about it, because God has just made the birds and sea monsters, and all the cattle and creeping things, and the wild animals, but of none of these has He said, they are in My image. So, even before we're created, we know that men and women are going to be special and, because we're made in God's image, that, at a very profound level, we're going somehow to share in His nature.

And this is where it all starts to get extremely interesting!

First off, we see immediately that the man and woman are created to live in family ... or, to put it more widely, in community. This is not an accident or mere matter of convenience, but is a direct consequence of our being made in the image of God, because God is a God of love and of relationship. As a reflection of Him, we share those characteristics, and it's in the family, from the moment of our birth, that we begin to learn what that means, first in receiving, then giving, love. And it's a lesson that can start only in weakness and dependence – because, let's face it, left to itself humankind is a bit obtuse and selfish. Who knows what the family would have looked like if Adam and Eve hadn't succumbed to temptation, but they did, and the reality for humankind

today is that we don't readily think of others, so our early years of dependence are absolutely vital. Otherwise, if we could, when we were born, we'd be off. As it is, we have to begin to learn 'community', and to love others apart from ourselves from day 1. There's no better way to learn that lesson than to start off being dependent, and then, later, to care for and protect those who need our support.

But God isn't 'man' or 'male', and He's not 'woman' or 'female'. He's totality – which means that in Himself He is all-encompassing male and female. And it's here that the fact Eve was created from Adam's rib is so important. **Together**, male and female, we are the image of God – and that's why we have the gift of marriage, because it's in union that the man and the woman complement and complete each other ... and only then, in that unity, that they fully reflect God. Which, by the by, is something same-sex marriage can't do, and why it runs counter to the Bible. Marriage, between a man and a woman, which becomes the basis for the family, is itself a reflection of God.

For this life, as individuals, we have distinctive roles that are a part of, and flow from, our biology. Traditionally the male is seen as strong, brave, independent, and assertive ... a leader; while a woman is caring, nurturing, and compassionate. Throughout history, a woman's primary task – dictated by biology and the preservation of the family – has been to care for the young and to make a home, where all family members will feel welcome and safe. The task of the man, by contrast, has been to provide for his family's needs and protect them. This doesn't mean, of course, that men and women don't share, in varying degrees, characteristics and strengths of the opposite sex. Men, for example, can be capable of great tenderness and gentleness, while a woman, especially if her child is threatened, can be violently aggressive and dangerous. And, despite what some may say, women can obviously be very effective and anointed leaders. Early on in the Bible, for instance, we have the example of Deborah, one of the early judges and leaders of Israel, who led the tribes to resounding victory against the Canaanites.

But the point, very broadly, is that all these qualities and traits – together – are a part of the character and nature of God. And nowhere do we see God's feminine aspects more clearly than where, in the Bible, He compares His love and care for us with that of a mother. See, for example, Isaiah 49:15, where God says to Zion, '*Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.*' Or Isaiah 66:13, '*As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you...*'. A mother's love, God is saying, is unconditional, it protects, it's sacrificial, and this is how He loves us. Indeed, this is why He sent His own Son into the world to save us, because, whatever happens, whatever we may do, God's love for us will never die.

But that doesn't mean that He's permissive, and we can do what we like. Far from it. God wants us to be free from sin, so that we can live in relationship with Himself and become fully what He has made us to be. By Christ's death on the Cross, yes, He's freed us from Satan's hold, but that's not the end of the story. To be set free, first, we have to accept Christ as Lord, and then we have to place ourselves into God's hands to be conformed to the image of His Son. And crucial to that process of redemption – once again like a mother – God trains and disciplines us.

The title for our sermon today, in our series *What the Lord requires*, is 'Mercy'. A dictionary definition of mercy is 'compassion or forgiveness shown towards someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm'. Well, if you look back through history, and at our own lives, we've certainly done things that deserve punishment, and God certainly has the power and right to punish us. But in likening His love to that of a mother, God is saying that He will never give up on us – if we repent, and take up the offer of forgiveness by obedience to His Son, even now, at this late hour, He can and will save us.

A mother's love for her child never goes away, but because she loves that child, a mother must also impose discipline. It's how a child learns. It goes without saying that that discipline must always be carried out with compassion and love, but it has to be done in order to save the child from harm and to help him or her grow in the right way.

Which brings us to the question of what God is saying to humanity today. Over the last century, mankind has increasingly rejected God. In our hubris, we've said there are no fixed rules, we can live as we want, do as we want. We're in control. And in the West, especially, we've denied biology, teaching children that gender is choice, and celebrating any and all kinds of sexual behaviour that the mind can conceive. Which means that the male/female aspects of our creation have got out of alignment, and the result has been a disaster, with ever-increasing chaos, confusion and violence. All of which means that we've put ourselves under judgment. Whether we really are living in the end times or not, I don't know, but what is absolutely certain is that God has seen from heaven how we're living, and He will not allow this to continue. There's terrible destruction ahead, – and there's only one thing that can save us. Men and women need to repent, and cry out to God for help ... just like we did in WW2, when it looked like Britain was faced with certain destruction.

In God we see the mother-love that fights for us and won't let us go, that even now reaches out in mercy. But God is not a permissive parent, and He won't just let us do what we want, because that would leave us under the control – the stranglehold – of evil. It would leave mankind enslaved to sin. So now, God draws near in judgment. But His will, even at this late hour, is still to save.

So that's our call this Mothering Sunday: to carry His light, in obedience, out into the darkness suffocating the world, that those who've been blinded and ensnared by the lies might even now be enabled to see the truth, and turn to Him and be set free.

The times are, without question, dire, but God is still a God of love, who hears and who responds ... and it may be that, even at this late hour, if men and women repent, He will withhold His hand. It is an indisputable fact that mankind needs to be cleansed of the evil we've not just allowed to take root, but have actively worshipped, and 'punishment' for our rebellion is unavoidable. But let us never forget God's mercy – His will to save. And let us pray, even at this late hour, that the nation repents, so that the punishment that lies ahead may lead not to our destruction, but to restoration.