

Mothering Sunday 2021 (14.03.2021)

Exodus 2: 1 – 10; John 19: 25b – 27

One of the perks of being the Rector is that I get to manipulate – I mean coordinate – the preaching rotas so I don't need to preach on Sundays I don't like. I have been robbed of it by the lockdown. The Priory's Parish Deacon, the Revd Jean Fowler has been faithfully coming in to deliver a sermon once a month. The rest of the time, she's busy doing distinctively diaconal things. The Priory's Associate Minister, the Revd Christine Strand, of course has been maintaining a high online profile with her Sunday evening reflections, but has been staying away from the Priory in case I ever needed to self-isolate. And the Priory's Curate, the Revd Maxine Waller has been shielding. All of which means that this is the first Mothering Sunday on which I've preached, for years. Because I don't like Mothering Sunday.

Let me make it clear: that's not because I have any particular grievance against my own aged mater. I may make jokes about being psychologically scarred for life by being brought up in a household presided over by the Pollard matriarch, but that's precisely what they are: pretty feeble attempts to be funny. The truth is I've received nothing other than unconditional love and security and stability from the parenting I had. To suggest otherwise is to be trivial and to risk insulting people who are genuinely damaged by inadequate, dysfunctional or neglectful parenting, either because they received it or because their consciences are troubled by having administered it.

And that's the problem with Mothering Sunday. Each year there are anecdotes of people staying away because their real-life experience doesn't match up to the ideal we peddle of simpering, gentle, patient, self-denying motherhood. Of course, gentleness, patience and self-denial are all virtues. But if you're only ever gentle, patient and self-denying, you're not virtuous:

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you're psychologically unbalanced. We want to give thanks and celebrate women who are kick-ass; who are intelligent, independent, enterprising, challenging and fun. We want to celebrate women who just about manage to cope, notwithstanding their brokenness.

So, of the various readings that are available for Mothering Sunday, I've chosen ones in which there are actors other than the mothers. Moses' mother, of course, conforms to type and is prepared to allow her son to be torn from her in order to ensure his survival (and is rewarded for it); and Mary simply swaps washing Jesus' dirty socks for looking after the disciple whom Jesus loved. But, in each story, there are also other people who are prepared to compromise their privilege in order to reach out others who are vulnerable.

Pharaoh's daughter had all the obvious privileges of being a princess - even though we've learnt this week, if we didn't already know, that those privileges come at

a price. She extended those privileges to the foundling whom she took in. The disciple whom Jesus loved – let's assume it's John – stood in a position of privilege which was perhaps more obvious in his day than it is today, but which stemmed from the assumed privilege of being male. If Mary had lost both Joseph and now Jesus, she could not live independently without the protection and patronage of a man. John risked the gossip of him taking in this unconnected woman to provide her that protection and patronage out of his assumed privilege – the privilege that had just come with the accident of being born male.

Assumed privilege is something we find it very difficult to come to terms with in contemporary society. It is something of which we are not prepared to cultivate self-awareness. Earlier in the week I walked into the last few minutes of a television programme about privilege. A white, working class man from a town in the North West, who came across as a very likable, warm hearted sort of person, was explaining that after

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a lifetime of pensionable work he was in a very comfortable position, but he wouldn't describe himself as privileged because everything he had, he'd worked hard for. He was unable to see that he'd only had the opportunity to work hard because of the accidents of being born when he was, where he was, in the household he was. And those factors were why he's a privileged person.

This week we've had the reaction to the Oprah Winfrey interview with the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. I'm not concerned about royal tittle tattle, but what did concern me about the reaction was the evidence of an inability or unwillingness to comprehend the possibility that people can be racist. The Society of Editors *immediately* issued a rebuttal¹, saying "the press is certainly not racist." It shows a total lack of self-awareness; of appreciating that everybody – no matter how committed to avoiding and eliminating

racism – is capable of harbouring sub-conscious racist prejudice that needs constantly to be reflected upon, acknowledged, challenged and removed. Nobody can afford to dismiss a claim of racism without soul searching and a review of the evidence.

And, of course, with the tragic murder of Sarah Everard, there has been an outpouring of a call for men to recognise and unlearn habits which intimidate women.

Lenten disciplines are about self-examination and growing closer to God. The cultivation of an acknowledgement of our own privileges and of empathy for those who do not share them is a spiritual imperative. If we can find the grace and humility seriously to engage in that discipline we will be kinder, gentler, more patient, more self-denying.

¹ Cited in the Guardian Opinion column by Joseph Harker, dated 6.03.2021, and entitled "The British press isn't racist, say the editors. This just shows how long the problem will endure."

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And that brings us full circle; back round to very qualities traditionally associated with mothers for whom, today, we give thanks and celebrate.

Amen.