

Sermon preached by Rev'd Glenn Maytum

MID LENT MOTHERING SUNDAY, 22nd March, 2020.

Did you know last Friday was “World Happiness Day”? It may have slipped past you, unnoticed.

The timing of that day is interesting, to me, because the Sundays in Lent and Advent have never been regarded as fasting days and Mid Lent and Mid Advent were, from the earliest times, celebrated with a sense of light-heartedness.

Welcome to Laetare Sunday. This is the fourth Sunday of Lent, mid-Lent, and the name comes from Isaiah 66:10, where we read “O be joyful Jerusalem” (in Latin, “Laetare, Jerusalem”). You will find in many places the priest will wear rose coloured vestments. The change of colour from severe Purple to brighter Rose provides encouragement to continue our spiritual journey through Lent.

This Sunday is also known as Refreshment Sunday or, especially in England, Mothering Sunday. It is a day of relaxation from normal Lenten disciplines and a day of hope as we look towards Easter.

Mothering Sunday began as an explicitly religious event in the 16th century, with no connection to “mothers”, at all. The word ‘mothering’ referred to the “mother church”, the main church or cathedral of the region. It became the tradition that, on the fourth Sunday of Lent, people would return to their mother church for a special service.

From this, the custom grew up in medieval times for children away from home (working as domestics, apprentices, etc) to return to visit their parents and for older servants to be given a special holiday for the same purpose. They brought with them posies of flowers for their mother.

And their mother would bake them a simnel cake. Simnel is the wholegrain left over from the milling process. It is not unlike semolina. It was a heavy, fruit cake, seen as a bit of an indulgence in the middle of Lent, to make up for the general austerity of Lent. It consisted of layers of cake and marzipan, adorned with eleven balls of marzipan, representing the eleven faithful disciples of Jesus.

The young ones would take it back with them to where they worked so that they had something with which to fortify themselves during the final weeks of austerity. It was not baked with any alcohol in it, so it would have to be consumed fairly soon after the child's return to the workplace.

And, further, the idea of Mothering Sunday also developed into not only visiting mother, at home, but to visit, as a family, the mother church: the most significant church in the person's life (remember, we would be talking about people who grew up in villages). This was called "Going A-Mothering". So, the important aspects of life would be remembered in that building- the joyful and the sad. Baptisms, confirmations, marriages, funerals. All involving family members and members of the wider community.

I also found it interesting that, despite its long existence in British culture, Mothering Sunday fell out of fashion at the start of the 20th century! Constance Penswick-Smith, the daughter of a vicar, thought the demise of Mothering Sunday was a shame, so she wrote a book "The Revival of Mothering Sunday" and formed the Society for the Observance of Mothering Sunday to revive interest. Her determination paid off and the festival was restored on the traditional fourth Sunday of Lent, but with a greater emphasis on mothers, rather than Mother Church.

Back on the First Sunday of Lent, I referred to today's gospel reading [John 9: 1-41] and I said that this year's readings are from the ancient tradition of the Christian Church for teaching those who were preparing for Baptism at Easter and they show the "gradual process of enlightenment which characterizes the spiritual journey of all believers."

As we move closer to Easter, we find today's reading and today's theme of "Mothering Sunday" are both about a spiritual journey.

In a Lenten Study Book called "Set Free", Bishop John McIntyre some years ago explained the story clearly. He said...The man born blind is caught in the viewpoint of the Law of Moses where someone in the family has acted incorrectly and under the Law, someone must be punished.

He wrote, "For Jesus, there is a whole new possibility when the circumstances of the man born blind are seen (NOT from the point of the rules of the Law),

but from the point of God's Grace. When God's Grace touches a person's life, it empowers them.

The man is the only one, apart from Jesus, who can see this!

And, when he does, it transforms him. He sees with new eyes.

His belief is an immediate response to being touched by God's Grace.

It is just like the words of the Jason Miraz song: "Open up your mind and see, like me!"

He worships Jesus because, in Jesus, he finds the one who, through Grace, has opened NOT just his physical eyes, but eyes with which to see what is true and what really matters in life.

He grows in strength and courage as the story unfolds. Gradually, he comes to understand who Jesus is and he sees clearly enough to challenge the religious leaders, despite their power and control. He tells them the truth he now literally sees, from his personal experience of grace.

In this story, while the Pharisees knew their faith came from God, they became pre-occupied with the rules that had been given to help people find God. They focussed on the rules and they lost sight of God.

So, the man born blind not only received his physical sight, but he received understanding through the questions that were asked.

Lent is a journey for us to take stock of our spiritual blindness. It is a time for us to not only ask who it is we are seeking, but to keep asking questions that enable us to see the Lord Jesus more clearly.

Page 82 of our Lenten Study Book made me think of something I heard some time ago: for some people the longest journey they may make is about 32 cm: the distance from the head to the heart in an adult. It is another way of saying it is the difference between knowing ABOUT God and KNOWING God.

In your Lenten journey, how does today's gospel reading speak to you?

What do you see?