**Sermon: Motherhood (Preacher: Rev Mike)**

**Readings: Exodus 2:1-10 (CEV)**

# John 19:25-27 (NIVUK)

This morning’s Bible readings both contain what might be described as very modern approaches to motherhood. In the Gospel reading, Jesus, on the cross, addresses His mother, Mary and the disciple, John, perhaps the closest of his friends, and initiates a new relationship between them. John is now to regard Mary as his mother and Mary to look upon John as a son. It is the creation of a new family, founded on God’s love, rather than human biology and suggests that there exists something very fluid within human relationships, such that roles need not be held too tightly and that the deep, incomparable love of a mother is something that we should all aspire to apply to anyone in need.

And then in the Old Testament, we find ourselves a further 1500 years back in time, but again, in the middle of another adoption story as Moses is famously set afloat on the Nile by his birth mother in order to escape the murderous intentions of the Egyptians. He is found in the bullrushes by none less than the Pharaoh’s daughter, whose motherly instinct seemingly overrides her father’s commands, and she takes pity on the child. Thankfully, the child’s sister is quickly on the scene and suggests a Hebrew nurse to help out, which she arranges to be her mother. So, Moses is adopted and then brought up by two mothers of different racial backgrounds…I told you it was modern! Or maybe it’s just that we’ve become stuck in certain ways.

Recent thinking has challenged our attitudes to all manner of traditional relationships and has asked us to consider how we understand not just the nuclear family, but definitions of sexuality, of gender, and a whole host of combinations and terms to accompany them, that can be very confusing and disorientating.

Sadly, such developments have often led to polarisation, as we perceive threat, either in demands to accept the unfamiliar, or in those whose defence of the familiar seems to exclude our own interests. Clearly, it's a bit of a mess and has led to all manner of intolerant and unkind responses, especially on social media.

And church is certainly not excluded from these debates. Fault lines regarding our understanding of marriage, of relationships in general, of gender identity and the broader question of what it means to be human are deepening by the day and rarely present an attractive image of God’s Church.

When reflecting on these questions, I sometimes wonder whether part of the problem is our becoming too fixated on labels, and beyond that, on our use of these labels. We tend to attach labels to types of identity in the form of a noun, something that refers to a particular case, a category, a being, a state. “Motherhood”, for example is the state of having given birth to a child. As a noun, it is a factual statement, simply referring to the biological relationship between the one who has given birth and the one who has been born.

But what if we thought of these identity labels more in terms of a verb? What if rather than seeing them fixed in a particular way, we saw them as the outcome of what we do, of how we act, of our direction of travel? Thinking in this way, then allows the qualities that are associated with our experience and understanding of the noun, to become the main point of focus.

Today, we celebrate motherhood, but very few of us will be saying to our mothers, “thank you for allowing me to gestate”; “thank you for sharing your DNA with me”! We may well be grateful that our mothers were willing to go through childbirth for us, but I suspect that most of us will instead, be wanting to celebrate motherhood as a verb. As a biological fact, “motherhood” is simply the description of a condition and not something that we would instinctively celebrate, but as an ongoing testimony to unconditional love, there is a great deal to be thankful for.

It is, obviously, this understanding of “motherhood” as a verb that we see in our Bible readings. Jesus makes it clear that the qualities of motherhood are transferable, even to those who have not been able to give birth and perhaps also to those whose gender precludes it. Interestingly, the top return on an Amazon search for books on “motherhood” is *Everything I've Learned about Motherhood (From My Single-Parent Dad)*.

And a google search for the qualities that we would expect to align with “motherhood” reveals many lists containing very similar ideas. For example, “Mamma bear’s” website lists “*endless love, patience, determination, hopefulness, support & humility*”, all qualities that we would expect to find in abundance within a flourishing society.

Now, I certainly don’t have all the answers to the questions of identity that are so afflicting us at the moment, but I suspect that views based less on a fixed understanding of terms and more on what these terms look like in their best possible application, are much more likely to lead to ways of peace and love - perhaps even to ways that reflect God’s Spirit…Positive femininity, seen as nurturing, healing, caring; positive masculinity, seen as protecting, building, striving; positive sexuality, seen as honouring, fulfilling and loving; positive humanity seen as stewarding, conserving and co-existing – all things based on what the best of us looks like in action, rather than limiting us to an, often prescriptive, noun.

These are complex issues and we certainly live in complex times. The interchangeability of our world seems to have no limit and it is likely that the extremes that some wish to go to in order to enshrine this in law, education and common acceptance is well beyond what many of us see as reasonable or intelligible. Yet, we must acknowledge that we will all harbour outlooks that reflect personal preferences, rather than God given laws, and it is important that we are each willing to explore reality from another’s perspective.

When examining the qualities that many see to be at the heart of motherhood, I was quite struck by how similar they were to what St Paul lists as being the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians… “*love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,gentleness and self-control*.”

It is clear that our world needs us to exercise these “motherly” qualities as much as we can, both in our day to day exchanges and in our public profile as a church – listening to understand, not just to challenge; allowing voices to be heard from all sides, even if the opinions expressed are far from our own; and having a starting point which reflects patience and tolerance, rather than one of our waiting to be upset or offended.

Undeniably, there is much upset, resentment and anger out there and we, as a church, need to set an example of being together that recognises everyone as a child of God, respected and beloved. Let’s not underestimate what can grow when we accept the call to reach out to others in new and unexpected ways. Amen