

Exodus 2.1-10 *Birth and Youth of Moses*

2 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. ² The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³ When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴ His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵ The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. ⁶ When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she said. ⁷ Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” ⁸ Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. ⁹ Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰ When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses,^[a] “because,” she said, “I drew him out^[b] of the water.”

1 Samuel 1.20-28

²⁰ In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, “I have asked him of the LORD.”

²¹ The man Elkanah and all his household went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. ²² But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, “As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the LORD, and remain there forever; I will offer him as a nazirite^[i] for all time.”^[ii] ²³ Her husband Elkanah said to her, “Do what seems best to you, wait until you have weaned him; only—may the LORD establish his word.”^[k] So the woman remained and nursed her son, until she weaned him. ²⁴ When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull,^[l] an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine. She brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh; and the child was young. ²⁵ Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. ²⁶ And she said, “Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. ²⁷ For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made to him. ²⁸ Therefore I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD.”

She left him there for the LORD.

Psalms 34.11-20

- ¹¹ Come, O children, listen to me;
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.
¹² Which of you desires life,
and covets many days to enjoy good?
¹³ Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.

¹⁴ Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it.

¹⁵ The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their cry.

¹⁶ The face of the LORD is against evildoers,
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.

¹⁷ When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears,
and rescues them from all their troubles.

¹⁸ The LORD is near to the brokenhearted,
and saves the crushed in spirit.

¹⁹ Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
but the LORD rescues them from them all.

²⁰ He keeps all their bones;
not one of them will be broken.

or Psalm 127.1-4

¹ Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.

Unless the LORD guards the city,
the guard keeps watch in vain.

² It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives sleep to his beloved. ^[a]

³ Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.

⁴ Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the sons of one's youth.

2 Corinthians 1.3-7 Paul's Thanksgiving after Affliction

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, ⁴ who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. ⁶ If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. ⁷ Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.

or Colossians 3.12-17

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord^[f] has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ^[g] dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.^[h] ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Luke 2.33-35

³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon^[i] blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

or John 19.25-27

²⁵ Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son."
²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

Sermon

The lectionary readings for Mothering Sunday, some of which we have heard today, don't always paint a very rosy picture of families and parenthood. They include narratives of mothers having to live apart from their children for their children's own safety, and having to make excruciating, impossible choices in order to secure their wellbeing. The fact that the compilers of the lectionary include readings like this – about Moses' mother and sister having to find ways to ensure his future in a situation of extreme threat; in a reading we didn't hear, about Hannah's heartbreaking decision to send her son Samuel to be brought up by others; in 2 Corinthians, about the need for consolation for suffering and affliction – makes clear that there is room in our tradition to tell the truth about grief as well as joy, and trauma as well as happiness.

Mothering Sunday (and any day that seems to centre happy, smiling families) can provoke complicated emotions for many people: those who have lost children, or are estranged from their children, or perhaps dearly wanted to have children but were never able to. Even for those who are what the Prayer Book calls "mature in years" and well past childbearing age themselves, days like this can provoke painful feelings and memories about our own relationships with our parents or those who cared for us growing up. One of the possible gospel readings for today, from Luke 2, reminds us that Mary the mother of Jesus was aware from early on that her life as a mother would be marked by pain – and that she herself knew what it was to lose a child well before his natural life expectancy. The other, from John 19, which we did hear, is a reminder that families are built on more than blood relationships, as we'll see in a moment.

Next week I'll be at a theology conference giving a response to a new book by my former student, Karen O'Donnell, now a well-established and highly-respected theologian in her own right. Fascinatingly, Karen O'Donnell has shown in her earlier work that some early eucharistic liturgies from the first few centuries of Christianity involved Christians receiving not only bread and wine but also milk (sometimes thickened, soured milk as is still commonly drunk in many Mediterranean and West Asian countries) as eucharistic elements. She notes that some such communion liturgies include quite extended imagery around breastfeeding and taking in God's milk. In this context the priest presiding at communion was sometimes understood as a "wet-nurse", a stand-in passing on the "milk" of God to the believers. In this way, the believers become Jesus' siblings through suckling milk from a common source (much like how, in Islamic cultures, children who have breastfed from the same person are considered milk-siblings). This imagery of breastfeeding in communion liturgy, and the centring of a bodily experience usually considered distinctively female and very often disparaged, is particularly striking given that, of course, for many centuries women were not ordained as priests, and female embodiment and female sexuality have sometimes been regarded with suspicion within the Christian tradition.

But in this more recent book, *The Dark Womb: Reconceiving Theology Through Reproductive Loss*, Karen O'Donnell's focus is on the experience of the ways in which some church settings unwittingly become deeply painful and wounding environments for people who long to have their own children and are not able to. Reflecting theologically on her own history of multiple miscarriages and ectopic pregnancies, she points to the trauma and damage that are reinforced by well-meaning people who tell those grieving pregnancy losses that if only they have faith and trust in God, one day they will be parents; or that miscarriages are blessings in disguise because had the babies been born they would likely have been disabled. In some church communities, she notes, there is such emphasis on marriage and having children as joyous rites of passage to adulthood that those who cannot have them – let alone those who do not want to – can feel very excluded and alienated.

The thirteenth-century philosopher and theologian, Thomas Aquinas, believed that it was natural for parents to be more deeply invested in their own children than in those of others, and thereby to provide better and more consistent care for them. He believed that through loving their own children first, people would then move naturally to wider disinterested love for others. But it's important to remember that this so-called "kin altruism" can be quite toxic, when it manifests as nepotism or tribalism, preference for those most like us, and often doesn't move beyond the idea of "taking care of our own first". Jesus, in fact, was quite disruptive of familial ties and certainly didn't seem to expect his followers to privilege people like them over strangers.

John 19:25-27 is a reminder that families are built on more than blood relationships and that affinities of love and loyalty are not contingent on biology: 'Standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.'

For those who have longed for their own children and been unable to have them, it will likely continue to feel complex and painful at times to be around other happy families, days like Mothering Sunday among them. Yet at a time when we are seeing images of people fleeing war and conflict, making the heartbreaking decision to separate from one another in order to afford their children the best chances (just as the mothers of Moses and Samuel sent their sons away trusting in God and the kindness of others to protect them), it's more important than ever to ensure that our bonds of community extend beyond those who are obviously like us and of us. As communities all over the country prepare to welcome refugees from Ukraine, let's remember, for example, that people who unlike most Ukrainians are not white and not Christian also continue to seek sanctuary in Britain and also deserve our welcome. We are all children of God, milk-siblings with Jesus the firstborn of creation, all deserving of care and all with a responsibility to care for others.