

Hello. We are now just over half-way through Lent. In my previous talk, exactly four weeks ago, I explored some thoughts about this most special church season, how it came into being and how the ways it is celebrated have changed over the centuries.

Are the Lenten days dragging for you? Inspired by preparing this talk, I have made myself a Lent Calendar. We always have Advent Calendars, but I have never thought of marking off the 40 days before! Back in February, I explained that Sundays are not counted, so there are actually 46 days. The calendar vividly illustrates that this is a long season, but it is punctuated by some very exceptional days, as we head towards the glory of Easter.

As our lovely church was still closed on **Ash Wednesday**, the first day of Lent, we were not able to hold the deeply moving service when we kneel at the altar rail and have our foreheads marked with a cross, made from burning the previous year's palms, while the celebrant prays solemn words from Ecclesiastes Chapter 3, verse 20, "*Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return*". It's such a reflective service which focuses our hearts on repentance and prayer. I am so sorry that we were not able to gather in person to share this quiet hour together.

Last month, I wondered if it might be better for us to add something positive to our lives rather than just denying ourselves, in the more traditional Lenten manner. There are some stern words in Matthew Chapter 6 about not boasting of our charitable giving or fasting, so even if we are finding Lent challenging it will be better to remain cheerful, tough as that may be!

The past year has been an exceptionally difficult one. Each of us has been tested in ways we could not have imagined in our carefree pre-pandemic lives. Living under the cloud of coronavirus, continually bombarded by depressing statistics of cases, hospital admissions and the tragically high number of those who have died, has, and continues to be, incredibly stressful. Not being able to see many of those we care for and being confined to our homes for so many months has taken its toll on mental and physical health from the young to the elderly.

Huw has been using the image of the desert as a way to describe life in lockdown and I'm sure we can all relate to that. Deserts are extraordinary. Hugely varied terrains from the hottest to the coldest places on earth, they all share emptiness and isolation as common features. In my travels I have been privileged to visit a few desert environments and been deeply struck by their peculiar beauty and amazing skylines; also, by the resilience of the people who make their homes in such inhospitable landscapes. In a desert one feels very much at the mercy of nature...and God. No wonder the Bible has so many references to them as places where people are banished because they have sinned but also as a space for reflection and refuge. I expect some of you, like me, can't read the passage from Isaiah, Chapter 40, verse 3, *A voice is calling, 'Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness. Make smooth in the desert a highway for our*

*God*, without also hearing Handel's glorious music from the oratorio "Messiah", triumphantly proclaiming that the Lord is master over all.

This, the fourth Sunday of Lent, is celebrated as **Mothering Sunday** and I like to think that we have reached an oasis in our desert, twenty-two days after the solemnity of Ash Wednesday. In Psalm 107, verse 35, we can be truly comforted to hear, "*But he can turn a barren wilderness into an oasis with water! He can make springs flow into desert lands.*"

How did this special feast day come to be a part of our Lent calendar?

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Mothering Sunday was less about mothers and more about the church. People would make a journey to their 'mother' church for a special service once a year – this might have been their home church, nearest cathedral or a major parish church in a bigger town. This was to symbolise the coming together of families and would have represented a significant journey for many.

A variation on the theme of visiting the 'mother church' was allowing those who worked as apprentices, or farmhands on wealthy farms and servants in the big houses, to have the day off on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent to visit their mothers. Before it became easy to travel widely, family get-togethers were far rarer – no zooms, facetimes and WhatsApp then to keep people in touch. In some ways, this tradition is still alive as grown-up children will often visit their parents on Mothering Sunday, taking flowers and enjoying a special meal together.

Last year we had just started the first lockdown, when Mothering Sunday took place on March 22<sup>nd</sup>. In my Coronavirus Journal, I recorded:

*Another glorious day. Mothering Sunday. Bel drove up, and left goodies on the doorstep; pink tulips, a card, a 1000-piece jigsaw and three of Stephen's delicious sausage rolls. We waved through the window as she drove briskly away. Went for a walk; tried to avoid people, as we are being advised to. On the way back saw Finella, with the little boys; they had come round to drop off some chocolate eggs and a sweet card made by Santi. Again, as with Annabel, it was so awful having to keep a firm distance and not have hugs. Later had a FaceTime with Edward to catch up with their lives in Preston. At 7 pm I put a candle in the front window, which all the churches suggested as a way to mark the first Sunday in lockdown. As not many people would see it in our cul-de-sac, I also put a photo of it on Facebook, and got some lovely comments. Virtual communication is certainly becoming extremely important.*

That seems so long ago; we were only at the start of the pandemic. Just as well that I didn't know how little physical contact I would have with my children and grandchildren in 2020. I am

sure you recognise that experience too. For those of us lucky enough to be able to move our relationships online, it has at least meant we have been able (once we all fathomed out the technology!) to stay connected with friends and families, which has been a considerable blessing and made the enforced restrictions a little easier to bear.

Even in a pandemic, as my journal story tells, it is possible to maintain the tradition of adult children visiting their mothers and giving flowers and gifts. The special family Sunday Lunch will have to wait until it is possible for us to be properly together again, but it will be all the more precious, because we have been deprived of such simple pleasures for so many months.

I am going to attempt to make a Simnel cake this year. The traditional Mothering Sunday treat. It's made of rich fruit cake and marzipan, decorated with 11 marzipan balls representing the disciples of Jesus, minus Judas. This cake is seen as a delicious bit of indulgence to make up for the general austerity of Lent. Just reading the recipe is mouth-watering and I do hope mine turns out like the picture!

Although we might consider Mothering Sunday to be very much a part of the church calendar, it had fallen out of fashion by the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A vicar's daughter called Constance Penswick-Smith wrote a book called "The Revival of Mothering Sunday" and also founded "The Society for the Observance of Mothering Sunday", which really rekindled interest in the subject; by 1938 it was claimed that the day was celebrated in every parish in Britain...and far beyond.

However, even a simple celebration to say 'thank you' for the nurture and care we receive from our mothers is actually anything but simple. For many, this day can be a very difficult - even painful one, bringing reminders of failure, disappointment and deep, deep loss. Motherhood is an extremely complex relationship. Being a parent is probably the biggest challenge we ever undertake. The evolving relationships with our children as they grow up, and then perhaps have children of their own, is a continual process of adjustment requiring patience, tolerance and the deepest well of love.

As we approach the dark days which led to the crucifixion of Jesus, it is impossible to imagine how his mother must have felt. Throughout his life, Mary knew her son was not just her child, but also the son of God - as the Angel Gabriel had explained to her before his birth and others did subsequently. Luke Chapter 2, verses 33-35 tells us, "Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby's mother, "This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, but he will be a joy to many others. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul." What a terrifying

prophecy for Mary to carry through all the years of Jesus' life, right up to the agony of watching her son on the cross; but she always loved him, and he loved her - even as he was dying, he entrusted her into the care of his best friend, John.

There are now two weeks until we reach the next oasis along our Lenten journey...Palm Sunday, which leads us into the drama of Holy Week and its life-changing conclusion - the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Day. As we struggle along, facing many challenging issues, it is so comforting to know that we are also part of a wider church family. This family might still have to rely on intermittent internet connections, confusing technology, or just on old-fashioned phone calls, letters and socially distanced visits, to remind us that we are not alone, there are people who care and want to help. The desert may be a daunting place, but it does contain oases where refreshment, both for the body and the soul, can be found.

Amen.