

Mother Sunday

The idea of having a special celebration for Mother's has been practised across a great many cultures and throughout all ages, but as ever these ancient ideas find a new expression through the Christian Faith.

Mothering Sunday was the day to visit one's "Mother Church" – that is the church where you were brought up, or baptised, the place where you began your faith journey.

Now I know that as a local man Ted and his family have an association with this church over generations so this is definitely his Mother church. Mine would be Kingsway Chapel at Chester, but who else would regard Holy Trinity Sunningdale as their Mother church, the place their faith journey started?

For others where then did your faith journey begin?

Inevitably any celebration that involved returning to a Mother church is likely to include visiting one's Mother assuming she lives locally to the church and so our traditional Mother's Day celebration has emerged and developed over the years.

When it comes to Mother's, they are uniquely different and yet there is a collective mothering characteristic. I remember as a boy falling off my bike in spectacular fashion outside Andrew Brint's house and heading for his back-door with blood leaking from various places – his Mum patched me up same as mine would have done.

My Aunt Rosamund is a more unique Mother. She didn't appear to regard boring things like cleaning as something that mattered too much, so you did rather take your life in your hands in her house. As an artist and musician she would rather be painting or playing the piano than doing something dull like washing up. Or cooking. But this left her time to share life with her two children, my cousins.

The year that Ghostbusters first hit the screens she spent a week making my cousin an exact replica of the costumes and techno pack – not just him but all his friends. The costumes were so good the boys got a job outside the cinema entertaining the crowds queuing for the film which they saw for free every night.

My own Mother is more conventional compared to Aunt, but doesn't quite always get my name right.

When she does come to visit you may hear her refer to me as Lawrence (that was my father) or David (that's her brother married to Rosamund) or she has been known to call me Iain (which is our son). When she finally lands on Jonathan – which is my full name - it's something of a relief.

Those of you who come on Sunday evening to share Film Club with me will not be surprised that when thinking about Mothers a film comes to mind – on this occasion "the Incredibles".

Slide – Helen Parr

This is Helen Parr. She appears to be an ordinary Mum doing ordinary things – like bathing the baby in the sink, but she is hiding her superpower, in truth she is Elastagirl with the incredible power to stretch. Whoever wrote the story has a great sense of humour but also insight – most Mothers feel as if they are stretched to their limit by the challenges of mothering.

Here is Helen Parr as Elastagirl, breaking into a secret facility to rescue her husband – on this occasion taking on the guards of Kronos.

Play film clip.

Mother Sunday

Our bible reading today introduces us to Hannah and her remarkable story. I'm glad we've read it today because talking about Hannah allows us to appreciate that Mothering Sunday has a much wider meaning for many people.

To backtrack a little – there's a man called Elkanah who has two wives – not unusual for that time and place. One wife was called Peninnah and she had children. The other wife was Hannah and she did not.

All this is explained in just two verses, but in the few words, 'Hannah had no children' we recognise a whole world of hurt.

Mothering Sunday isn't the easiest of days and I think Hannah would accord with that. Those whose Mum isn't with them any longer, those who didn't have the chance to be a Mum. Those Dad's who are both father and mother – life in all its complications is reflected in this day.

During this last week on the radio five live Tony Livesey has been sharing his story. His Mum died when he was in his early teens. He's been explaining how this day has always been a difficult day. He interviews Martin Lewis (the money guru) and Jonathan Walters (the footballer) and I have rarely heard such deeply moving and poignant interviews.

I think it was listening to them talking that made me look again at the story of Hannah with fresh eyes.

Once a year Elkanah took the whole family up to Shiloh, to the house of the Lord to offer an annual sacrifice. He gave offering portions to Peninnah and her children and a double portion to Hannah but if this occasion wasn't hard enough her co-wife – if there is such a word, used to taunt Hannah because she was childless.

Hannah was broken hearted so she took herself off to the temple and silently prayed – this is her prayer.

In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. ¹¹ And she made a vow, saying, 'Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.'

This is unusual isn't it? It seems like Hannah is offering God a deal. If you give me a child, I'll bring him up a strict Nazarite

That invites some profound questions about free-will and making deals with God and I'm very happy to talk with anyone about that – but for now a line from Ecclesiastes comes to mind ⁵ *Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything. ECC 11:5*

Hannah pours out her grief to God and the pain she has experienced has brought her to this place of offering herself and child to God. We haven't time to explore her dialogue with Eli the Priest (he thinks she is drunk) but he tells her to go in peace 'the God of Israel grant your petition'.

In due time her prayer is answered and the boy Samuel is born. When he is still a little child she takes him to Shiloh, presents him before God and there he stays – effectively she gives him into the adoption of Eli. Another aspect of Mothering Sunday – adoption and there are many aspects of that situation.

It's an unusual story and one of a number of remarkable Mothers and sons in the bible.

Sarah and Isaac.

The wife of Manoah and Sampson

Hannah and Samuel

Elizabeth and John the Baptist

Mary and Jesus

Mother Sunday

What can we take from this so that we renew a commitment to being a mothering church?

Hannah longed for a child and we too should pray that in every way possible there is the possibility of people coming to faith through the life and work of the church. It doesn't matter what age they are or whether their being 'born again' in faith is a sudden moment or a longer process, but the desire for Holy Trinity to be a faith maternity unit.

We should also be a place to care for those new to the life of faith and nurture their faith giving every opportunity to grow in faith. Small groups gathering together is the ideal place for this.

We should also set people free to serve, in the church, at home, at the workplace, in school. Hannah gave Samuel into the service of the temple at Shiloh and it's always tempting (for me) to want everyone to serve God in and through church, but there are so many others ways and places that God calls us to serve him.

Holy Trinity is to reflect the nature of the Trinity, of self-giving love, we are to love generously and courageously and in doing so seek to allow others to receive and be nurtured in the love of God.

We are to be a mother church that self-sacrifices, putting the needs of others first and serving the cause of bringing new Christians to birth.

We need to send out from here just as Hannah sent Samuel to serve at the temple. Samuel became the Priest and Judge of all Israel and the one who anointed first Saul and the David as kings of the nation. Who knows what those we send out from here might achieve?