

Sermon for Mothering Sunday, on Sunday Worship, BBC1
The Very Revd Dr Sarah Rowland Jones, Dean of St Davids
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Exodus 2:1-10

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. 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. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. 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. 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. 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?’ Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, ‘Yes.’ So the girl went and called the child’s mother. 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. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, ‘because’, she said, ‘I drew him out of the water.’

This passage, set over 3000 years ago, tells of the beginning of the life of the prophet Moses. The ancient Hebrew people, living in Egypt since the time of Joseph, have been made slaves by the Egyptians, who see them as a threat. Because they’ve continued to grow in number, the order has been made that all baby boys must be killed at birth. Now, an unnamed [in this passage] mother, in time of great threat, takes radical steps to ensure her son’s well-being. She loses him, but he is safe – and is brought up by Pharaoh’s daughter, as her own son.

Though this is the story of people long ago, far away, there’s something real about it. It doesn’t pretend family life is always easy or straightforward. I find this helpful, as I’ve not always found Mothering Sunday easy – especially when it seems to create a false picture, as though every mother were totally perfect, and every child utterly adoring, and every family lived happily ever after! Well, my mother is pretty special, but I don’t think either of us would claim she’s perfect – and though I love her very much, sometimes we really rub each other up the wrong way! Thankfully, Mothering Sunday isn’t about making mothers feel guilty for not being good enough, nor making children guilty about not seeing their mothers as perfect! Mothering Sunday is about sharing a God-shaped love that carries us past all the quirks we have, and over the bumps in the road of our relationships. It’s about loving one another warts and all, not demanding perfection from each other, but being generous and forgiving. And it’s about God’s love filling the gap, when sometimes we do fail and fall short and let each other down; and it’s about asking for the gift of Godly love, when our own love isn’t big enough for what life throws at us.

Our Old Testament reading showed how this sort of love, this mothering, can sometimes entail drastic action for the sake of loved ones. And it tells us that mothering doesn’t just

have to be from a birth-mother.

In this Cathedral, there's a beautiful icon of St David as a small child in the arms of his mother, St Non. But, legend has it, David was born as the result of his mother's rape – born through brutality into a life of stigma. Yet Non was not daunted. It seems she came from a Christian family, as she gave her son a Biblical name, and she brought him up as a Christian. He became one of the greatest Christian leaders of the sixth century, with a reputation as a holy man and great teacher that spread to Ireland, Brittany, and beyond. Now we know him as the patron saint of Wales. Whatever Non suffered, she was the right mother at the right time, in the right place, for this child. She was good enough, and willing to stick with God even through her trauma – and God used her for great things.

Here we are, as the pandemic worsens. We cannot guess how things will develop. Perhaps some of us will be called upon to take radical steps, like Moses' mother. Perhaps some of us will find ourselves caring for those who are not our flesh and blood, like Pharaoh's daughter. Perhaps some of us will suffer emotional and physical trauma, but dare to keep following Jesus Christ through it all.

And even if we don't, we may find being cooped up with our families a greater challenge than we'd expected! Our nearest and dearest often have a capacity to wind us up in ways that nobody else does! But we can ask God to pour his love into our lives, and help us just to get on and do the loving thing, even if we don't feel like it at the time. This sort of love is not a warm and fuzzy feeling – it is strong, courageous, enduring.

It's the sort of dedication that Lent calls out of us, though this is probably not be the sort of Lent we expected. On Ash Wednesday, many of us heard the invitation to 'the observance of a Holy Lent' through, among other things, sacrifice and self-denial, fasting and charity. And it struck me that this year, all these might take a very different shape. What if sacrifice becomes giving up things we take for granted, like foreign holidays, or even popping into a local café or pub. Could self-denial mean not taking that second packet of pasta, or else buying it to put in the food bank? Might fasting be a stepping back from the usual practices of life with all its connections, and bearing with good humour the necessity of self-isolation or quarantine for the sake of keeping others safe from any infection we may be. And can charity mean finding a generosity of spirit to look out for one another, to support those who are isolated, to lend a hand wherever its needed.

What if this year, observing Lent means taking on the challenge of good Mothering: all of us, by God's grace, and with his help, doing whatever it takes to keep safe not just those we know and love, but keep safe our wider society, our nation and world.

This is a slightly edited version of the sermon delivered during this programme.