

## **Mother's Day Sermon 2017 (26 March 2017)**

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

I am not a mum.

But I am a daughter.

And I know a lot of mums.

So I want to start today's sermon by saying a heartfelt thank you. Thank you to my mum for giving me life and for all the support and love since then. And thank you to all the mums I know. I've got to be honest and say that I find mums heroic – I want to thank them for all the sleepless nights, the selfless care, the putting their kids first, the creativity, the organisation, the fun, the humour, the cheerleading, the guiding, the encouragement, the wisdom, the nursing, the scolding – it's not quite 24/7 – but it practically is.

A few years ago, I looked after my sister's four children for 48 hours – unaided – and as a 'fun aunty' but inexperienced full time carer, I asked for instructions. My sister gave me 4 sides of A4 in detailed notes – and just the morning drill of breakfast and school run almost finished me off!

So the foundation of Mother's Day must start in gratitude – a huge, straight out gratitude – for all the day to day reality of love given and care given that mothers do every single day – and they don't do it for medals or flowers – they do it from love (and sometimes necessity).

I want to thank all kinds of mums – because each one of you will have different journeys, different ways of being a mum – thank you for all the good that you do your children. Thank you wholeheartedly.

But Mother's Day isn't a clear cut day – it's full of obstacles that stop it from being a 'Carlton Cards Kinda Day'. It can be fraught with difficulty – for people who've lost their mum, for people who didn't know their mum, for people whose mum was difficult or worse, for people who don't get on with their mum, for those who'd like to be mums, but can't or didn't or for those who did, but the experience was tougher than they'd thought possible.

Somehow we have to hold these two themes of *thankfulness* and *difficulty* together on this day. And so I'm grateful that the wisdom we draw on is not the wisdom of the Mother's Day card – but the wisdom of Holy Scripture. Somedays, I wish there was a cuter story in the Bible that would be suitable for Mother's day – like the kids' story about the elephant family, where the mum elephant just wants some solitude to have a bath in peace and quiet, but her kids keep getting in the way – it's adorable – and at some levels would be oh so perfect for today.

But the bible isn't good at that kind of heart warming story. Our two scripture readings today have tenderness in them and love – but they also have famine, separation, death and sorrow.

So let's start with the story of Naomi and Ruth – here's a daughter in law and a mother in law – trapped by an awful situation – famine and widowhood – Naomi, the older of the women, decides to return to her homeland and urges her daughters-in-law, whom she refers to as 'my daughters' to return to their tribe and try to marry again. One leaves reluctantly, but Ruth clings to her and utters one of the most poetic, poignant parts of scripture

'Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!  
Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.  
<sup>17</sup> Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.  
May the LORD do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!'

I love it in the King James Version too:

Intreat me not to leave thee,  
or to return from following after thee:  
for whither thou goest, I will go;  
and where thou lodgest, I will lodge:  
thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God:  
<sup>17</sup> Where thou diest, will I die,  
and there will I be buried:  
the LORD do so to me, and more also,  
if ought but death part thee and me.

I adore this text – many people do and many people would like it at their wedding – because it is one of the most tender expressions of deep love to be found in the whole of Scripture – how profound, how meaningful, how absolute, how unconditional. This is not a “I love you – isn’t it obvious” shot over the breakfast table without a moment’s consideration – this is deep and heartfelt, mature and considered.

And yet this profound and poetic expression of love is not inspired by romantic love. It’s the words of a daughter-in-law – to her mother-in-law – for whom their relationship felt like mother and daughter – it’s an adult to adult daughter to mother expression of love and it is beautiful.

So the first thing I want to bring out is this – if this is how you feel about your mother, or your aunt, or your grandmother, or your mother-in-law – let her know. Not necessarily as intense as this, but if this is your depth – then let her know – don’t wait for famine or crisis – but tell her profoundly all that she means. Daughters appreciate your mothers, mothers appreciate your daughters.

But the second thing I want to pull out is this – this is not a straightforward mother daughter relationship – it’s an ‘in-law’ relationship and it’s full of tribal friction. It’s a story of famine and death, of early widowhood and grief.

Beauty can come from hardship. Joy from grief.

This is the reality of life. Not a Mother’s Day card.

We will journey through life and experience all kind of difficulties and hardship – and sometimes it is our biological, nuclear family who will pull us through that – and praise God for that – but sometimes our support will come from other places, other people, other tribes – friendships outside our family network.

The Gospel passage expands on this theme. Jesus entrusts the care of his mother (whom he loves) to his *friend* – the disciple whom he loves – and Mary (now a widow and also about to lose her eldest, first born child) goes to live in the home of that disciple – under his care and love.

As Christians, this sense that our family is wider than our nuclear family is important and imperative – we call each other ‘brothers and sisters in Christ’ – and that will mean that within this Christian community – (not just here, but in the wider church) – we will find brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, aunties and uncles – and friends – Christ calls us to be his friends – and to live in bonds of friendship with others.

We live in turbulent times – fear and suspicion surround – especially fear of those who are different to us. The temptation is to pull close to our family and all that is familiar to us and avoid those harsh realities.

But the Scriptures push us towards notions of family and friendship that go beyond our kin – and towards those who are from a different tribe – like Naomi and Ruth – or who are not our family in the strictest of terms – like the disciple and Mary.

So on this Mother’s Day – let us be thankful for our mothers and for those who are mothers – whilst also keeping our hearts open to bonds of connection and affection that transcend those boundaries.

Amen.

*(Revd Sheridan James’ sermon notes. Live is better, but this gives you a flavour of the sermon that day).*