

Papa was the name used by his little girl for God and at first he thinks it's a sick joke left by one of his neighbours but eventually Mack goes to the shack, the very place where his daughter had been killed and nearby finds himself in a place of beauty. There in a cabin he meets 'Papa', not a white bearded man but a black woman who is baking bread in the kitchen....I thought this image would help you better she says, knowing that Mack's father beat him...and as they knead the dough Mack questions her about the death of Jesus, thinking that Papa was distant and uncaring, "I was there too" says Papa and she shows him her wrists, which also bare the marks of the nails.

My mum once said, "Someone may do what they want to me, but they touch my children at their peril"

Whenever and wherever God's children hurt, he hurts....

Love is what compelled the prodigal father, to prepare a feast, to spend even more on the lost one. And, it is what motivates our Prodigal God to move toward us as one who understands our pain, our loss, and our tears and who was prepared to die in our place, to spend his life lavishly and fully on us his wayward children. We of course have the benefit of hindsight living this side of Easter; we know that the Cross proved to be the place of victory, that after the apparent defeat of Jesus death came the new life of resurrection, but as his mothers watched him die she did not....

I think that If Jesus had only decided to give one parable this one would have been enough, because it reveals the depths of the Father, the Mother God who moves toward his children, not away from them.... Who seeks to pour out his own life when to all the world it seems foolish...to embrace, to comfort, to reach into the dark places where his children are hiding out, and be a bearer of truth and affection to those who don't deserve it....

When we fail and lose control, God wants his love to seep into our souls and to echo the voice of the Prodigal God saying, "You are held. You are seen. You are known. You are loved beyond comprehension. You will always be pursued, always be welcomed, and always be in my care. He will be the mother who takes hold of our hands knowing where he is going...

As Jesus looks over Jerusalem having in his mind its inhabitants he said "How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.

On this mothering Sunday when we give tokens of love to our earthly mother's or to simply remember those who gave us life or those who have been as mothers to us may we also run with abandon to our heavenly Father and Mother who has spent it all on us simply because we are loved. **Amen.**

Sermon St. Mary's Sanderstead / St James Riddlesdown

31.3.19 Lent 4 Mothering Sunday

Luke 15:1-3. 11b-32

By the time a child is 18 their mum will have spent an average of 18,000 hours of work on them, that on average those who do not have children have an extra 3 months leisure time every year.

When asked why God made mothers a child responded "Mostly to clean the house and to help us get out when we were being born.

When asked what would make your mum perfect a little girl responded, "On the inside she's already perfect but on the outside maybe a bit of plastic surgery".

And when asked what would be the one thing he'd change about his mum a boy said, "I'd like her to get rid of those eyes in the back of her head."

But being a mum is like owning a dog, it's a job for life.... as when a 102 year old lady was asked if she had any worries.

Her reply was "No, not now that I've got my youngest son in an old people's home".

And finally when a mother who had three children was asked, "If you had it all to do over again, would you have children?" She replied Yes, but not the same ones."

Today is a unique day in the year, a day set aside to give thanks for our mums...but we also have to acknowledge that today can be a sad day, which some people find quite difficult.

For some women - and men too - today day underlines a silent personal grief where quiet tears are shed:

Tears for children who have died, tears for children who have rejected them, tears for relationships that never happened, for the children that never were.

There will also be tears for mums who we have loved and been loved by and are now deeply missed.

If you are a Mum, you may feel a bit special today, you may have received a card and a present, you may get taken out to lunch or have lunch cooked for you...

If your children are still small, you may have received a hand made card full of glitter, which will have dropped all over the carpet as you opened it, joining the pine needles that you're still trying to Hoover up from Christmas.

But is Mothering Sunday really only for those of us who have given birth, is it so exclusive that the rest of us might as well switch off for the next 10 minutes or better still, have spent the morning in bed rather than coming to church.

I don't think so...because mothering Sunday is for all of us...

It may seem a little odd to put mothering Sunday so near to holy week, which is full of sadness and loss and pain, but maybe it's set at this time of year to help us remember that relationships that are meaningful and precious are seldom without pain and loss.

Solomon Rosenberg, his wife and their two sons were arrested, together with his mother and father for being Jews and they were put in a concentration camp.

The rules were simple, "work, and you will live, but when you become too weak to work, then you will die."

Solomon saw with his own eyes what happened when his parents became too weak and he knew that the next would be his youngest son, David, because David had always been a frail child.

So every evening, Solomon came back to the barracks after his hours of hard labour and searched for the faces of his family. When he found them they would huddle together, embrace one another and thank God for another day of life.

But one day Solomon came back and didn't see those familiar faces.

When he finally found his eldest son, Joshua, huddled, in a corner crying and praying. He said, "Josh, tell me it's not true."

Joshua turned and said, "Dad, it is true.... today David was not strong enough and so they came for him.

"But where is your mother?" asked Solomon...

"When they came for David, he was afraid and he cried, and so Mum said, 'There is nothing to be afraid of David,' and she took his hand and went with him."

To love means to put ourselves at risk, where our hearts will sometimes be heavy and sometimes even broken.

We are all made in the image of God, a God who is both male and female, Father and Mother, and real love costs and sometimes we may have to pay for it with the currency of our tears.

Our gospel reading this morning is a story that is full of cost, full of grief, full of rejection, of loss, of tears.... but also of hope, joy and reunion.

Many in this world can identify with the shame and squander of the returning son, the son, who in asking for his half of the inheritance was in essence wishing his father dead, and claiming his portion he leaves only to lose it all.

We all know what it's like to feel shame, to know how sour it is to eat humble pie.

But that's what this prodigal did.... for he had no other choice.

But whenever I read this story I always wonder where mum was...

In a patriarchal society women didn't have a voice, so was she in the background, had she died, or had she ever since her wayward son left home, been praying desperately out of a broken heart.

The way that Jesus portrays the father in this parable is not of a typical first century father. He would have been ashamed of his son, he would not want him to return, he would want nothing further to do with him....

But this man acts more like a mother... constantly looking, waiting and watching for the boy whose lost to come home, and upon seeing him doesn't keep a stiff upper lip, but is rather filled with emotion, running towards the boy hugging and kissing him, finding him clean clothes, and feeding him.

He doesn't wait for an apology, from this wayward lad who has already squandered half the estate, already proven to be unwise, and untrustworthy - No, he forgives as if nothing has happened.

While God has chosen to reveal himself through the bible in largely masculine terms he also demonstrates that he has the traits of a perfect mother....

In Isaiah we read that God is described as a woman in labour (Is. 42:14) as having given birth to his people (Deut. 32:18). He is compared to a nursing and comforting mother (Is. 49:15; 66:13; Ps. 131:2) as a mother who teaches their child to walk (Hos. 11:3)

As a mother bear, whose cubs have been taken away, a mother eagle caring for her young (Hos. 13:8; Deut. 32:11-12) and as a woman who cleans the house looking for a lost coin (Luke. 15:8-)

In Isaiah 49 we read "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you says the Lord"

Last Wednesday we met for our film night, the film I showed was called "The Shack", In the story, Mack loses his little girl to a murderer and as a result enters a dark place of guilt, un-forgiveness and unending sadness, but one day he receives a note in the letterbox left without any traces in the snow... It read;

"It's been a while, Mack, so meet me in the shack... Papa"