

Sunday
21st March
2021

FOR
GOD
S O
LOVED
T H E
WORLD

Lent 4

Online Worship for St Paul's URC
and South Croydon United Church

Lent 4 – Mothering Sunday

Led by Fran Boto and Rev'd Martin Knight

Opening Music –

'In the Lord I'll be ever thankful' - Taize Community
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Slj2qCadeGI>

Welcome

Welcome Friends, to our online worship for St Paul's URC and South Croydon United Church on this Mothering Sunday and as we continue our journey through Lent.

I am delighted that, as she continues her Lay Preaching course, Fran Boto is leading the first section of our service:

Call to Worship – Fran Boto

See how loved we are by God!

Hear the words in Hosea;

*"When Israel was a child I loved him
and called him out of Egypt as my son,
but the more I called to him,
the more he turned away from me.*

Yet I was the one who taught Israel to walk.

*I took my people up in my arms,
but they did not acknowledge that I took care of them.*

*I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love.
To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek,
And I bend down to feed them."*

'Mothering God, you gave me birth'

https://youtu.be/dTFRqctPYP8?list=TLpqMDkwMzlwMjFzni43umW_vw

Mothering God, you gave me birth
in the bright morning of this world.
Creator, Source of every breath,
you are my rain, my wind, my sun;
you are my rain, my wind, my sun.

Mothering Christ, you took my form,
offering me your food of light,
grain of light and grape of love,
your very body for my peace;
your very body for my peace.

Mothering Spirit, nurturing one,
in arms of patience, hold me close,
so that in faith I root and grow,
Until I flower, until I know;
Until I flower, until I know.

Words by Jean Janzen from Julian of Norwich.

Tune by Carolyn Jennings.

Prayer

The Lord's Prayer

*O God, we thank you for your enduring patience.
We stumble, we have deaf ears
and yet you continue to believe in us,
to find something of good in the messes we make of our lives,
to equip us and strengthen us in mind, body and spirit.*

*We thank you for putting us straight.
We thank you that as our parent your love includes both
encouragement and setting limits.*

*We are sorry when we deny ourselves the closest and most
nurturing relationship we can have with you by not holding your
hand a little tighter or becoming distracted by the sights and
sounds that blur our senses.*

*We are sorry that this has detracted us from fully loving our
families, friends, neighbours and communities in ways which bring
glimpses of your glorious Kingdom in our day to day lives.*

*We thank you for your gracious mercy and step forward into the
next week in the confidence that we are your loved and forgiven
children;*

Let us say together the words of the Prayer that Jesus taught us;

*Our Father, Who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name,
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory
Forever and ever. Amen*

John 3:14-21 – read by Cathy Heath

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

¹⁹ And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

'Loving Christ, we praise your sacrifice'

Tune Abingdon' played at St James's URC, Newcastle upon Tyne

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtfDlfN1ovg>

Lord Christ, we praise your sacrifice,
your life in love so freely given.
For those who took your life away
you prayed: that they might be forgiven;
and there, in helplessness arrayed,
God's power was perfectly displayed.

Once helpless in your mother's arms,
dependent on her mercy then;
at last, by choice, in other hands,
you were as helpless once again;
and, at their mercy, crucified,
you claimed your victory and died.

Though helpless and rejected then,
you're now as risen Lord acclaimed;
forever by your sacrifice
is God's eternal love proclaimed:
the love which, dying, brings to birth
new life and hope for all on earth.

So, living Lord, prepare us now
your willing helplessness to share;
to give ourselves in sacrifice
to overcome the world's despair;
in love to give our lives away
and claim your victory today.

Words: Alan Gaunt, © 1991 Stainer & Bell

'Love Revealed'

*God alive among us,
may we make that vital connection between your word and our lives.*

Today's passage is very familiar and loved, as it includes the words 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only son'.

But our reading today starts with the slightly stranger image of a snake on a stick.

This may sound like the forerunner to the terrible film 'Snakes on a Plane', (which, if you haven't seen it, don't bother!), but is

actually an allusion to the OT book of Numbers 21, where we find ourselves roaming around in the wilderness with Moses and the Israelites.

And this rather epic wandering journey was not, by any means, comfortable. If we look at verse 5, we hear the Israelites grumbling against God: '*Why have you brought us up our of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.*'

What happens next may be a simple coincidence or perhaps the writers of Numbers were right in thinking that, to show the people their mistake in grumbling, God sends poisonous serpents, who bite and kill many Israelites.

When they cry out to Moses to pray to God to take the snakes away, God's prescription is a mounted serpent set up in the camp. To experience healing, the Israelites must look to the serpent raised above them.

The Bronze snake is a revelation: a display of both God's rescue and punishment.

'And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up.'

Back to John's gospel.

After Jesus has poured out righteous-anger at the temple, over-turning tables and driving out a menagerie of animals and birds, we find him having a night-time chat with one of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, Nicodemus who, quite reasonably,

doesn't understand who Jesus is and why/how he has done 'all these things'.

What we have heard today, is Jesus' answer to his questions, which starts with the allusion of the serpent.

Just as the Bronze snake was a revelation, so is Jesus.

(Sculpture at Mt. Hebo, looking across Jordan Valley)



Jesus exposes us to who God is: rescuer, healer, giver of wholeness and justice – and all these things are often found through recognising our faults and all that harms us.

Jesus doesn't teach us that God condemns us, but rather loves us back to life – even by showing us our faults.

Alongside the Bronze snake, Jesus uses another image familiar to Nicodemus and throughout the OT and the Gospel: light and darkness.

In the shadows and darkness of Covid over Christmas, we have hugely valued the light. Bright Christmas Trees and strings of lights around our houses – many folk keeping them up far longer than they normally would, just for the hope and joy they bring.

Jesus is Light and Life, but his brightness can be blinding. While some look upon him and receive his light, most turn away. ‘People love darkness more than light’ he says.

Jesus is never surprised by people in John’s gospel, but he continually surprises, challenges and confuses those who see him.

Jesus’ arrival; his revelation, therefore, can lead us out of darkness and into light and life, or it can confirm our place among the dead in the shadows. God’s motivation for sending Jesus is not condemnation, but love.

It will not have escaped your notice that today is Mothering Sunday. We cannot dodge the truth that Mother’s Day is something of a corruption of its origin.

The cards and flowers and celebration of Mothers, is a long way from giving thanks for the Mother Church and the family of Christ.

At a SLSA minister’s meeting this week, we were discussing the challenges of marking Mothering Sunday in today’s world and I quite understood some talking about how challenging it can be – because everyone’s experience of Mother’s is very different. Some were lamenting how complicated our modern world is, needing to take account of a variety of types of families and experiences.

I see it differently.

I think we need to recognise that the simpler past of celebrating Mother's, was a false image. So many experiences of Motherhood were never touched on or recognised.

A complex and nuanced picture is more honest.

It is absolutely true that we need to be more careful and more pastoral aware than we used to, but this is no bad thing. It is, in fact, a very good and life-giving thing.

The light of a more diverse picture of parenting has emerged and has challenged us to recognise and acknowledge the breadth of ways that we experience God's love through those who nurture us.

Put yourself in the shoes of a woman unable to have children – how might she have experienced Mothering Sundays?

To hear her experience named and honoured might be like light shining in the darkness of shame, pain and anger.

How about those parents who have lost a child, those of us whose Mother's have died, those adopted, or who Mother's walked out or caused abuse?

What about couples conceiving via IVF – straight couples or from the LGBTQ+ communities?

The experience of being brought up, by Mum's, Dad's, grandparents, adoptive or foster parents – whatever your lived-experience, it displays the truth; the glorious complexity of ways that we can know unconditional, wonderful light-filled love that helps us grow.

Naming these experiences can also highlight and display the hidden darkness: on Mothering Sunday we must also name abuse, rape, the death of children and parents, children kicked out of their home...

Mothering Sunday can be a revelation to the breadth of life-giving families: a source of deep joy and it can expose our human frailty and failings.

Perhaps we can helpfully understand Mothering Sunday as a day to ask, ‘where have I seen love revealed?’.

Equally and importantly, the answers to this question might also reveal our mistakes, our fear, selfishness and pain.

Signs of love often expose our failings.

The light of Christ is a revelation that reveals our sin, yet surrounds us with God’s love as an opportunity to change.

Where else do we see love revealed?

Throughout Covid, a persistent theme has been the wonderful care and courage of nurses and NHS staff. We have absolutely seen unconditional, sacrificial love on display, which has been a bright, hope-filled light in our darkness.

What human mistakes has this revelation of love exposed and given us the possibility to put right?

Perhaps how undervalued financially, health and care workers are. Perhaps this has helped us to see others, undervalued by society.

Will we respond to the light and make positive changes or ignore what it has shown us, retreating back into the dark.

As we continue on our Lenten journey towards Jesus' death, raised on the cross, we are discovering that Jesus is a revelation, a sign of love – that we 'may not perish, but have eternal life': a light that both frees us and exposes the darkness, giving us the chance to change and adapt, claiming the light as our guide.

'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son' – a symbol, who will be raised high, of what love can do.

Where do we see his light in our world and in our own lives? Name it, follow it, protect it and nurture it – that we may be people who prefer the light, however exposing and uncomfortable that might be.

We continue to walk with Jesus, through Lent – giving thanks for God's love, praising the light and confronting the dark in our lives. And God walks with us, with love in her eyes.

Prayers

Holy One, we gather in your presence to give you thanks and to celebrate the gift of your love; a love that supports, nurtures and challenges us in ways that strengthen and transform us.

We offer you praise and thanksgiving for your unfailing presence in our lives and all the blessings that you so generously offer us.

Today, as we celebrate Mother's Day, we give thanks for mothers the world over. We give thanks for all those who have nurtured and care for us, remembering especially, birth mothers, adoptive mothers, surrogate mothers, aunts, grandmothers, teachers, neighbours and all who have shared their faith with us.

We pray, compassionate God, for those mothers who have been hurt, disillusioned, or disappointed in their role as mother.

We pray for those who have been denied a longed-for chance at motherhood, and for those whose years of mothering have been cut short by the loss of a child. For us children, who have never known our mothers or those who still grieve their loss and all for whom today is hard.

We lift up before you, O God, the members of our human family around the world—for those who are afflicted or suffering at this time—for those who need healing, for those who require bread or shelter, for those who live in violent homes and communities, for those who are grieving, and for those whose needs are known to you alone.

We remember...

Holy Mother and Father of us all, touch us with your healing peace and steadfast love that we may walk in your ways bringing dignity, justice and peace to all corners of your world.

All of this we pray in the name of Jesus – who unites all into our family, created and sustained by love.

Amen.

Notices

- Those at the London Tour (not at Synod)
- Desert Island Discs No.2, March 27th
St Paul's AGM and CM next Sunday – 21st March
Lent Course continues, 10am Tuesday
- SCUC are collecting Easter Eggs again this year, for Hestia, a charity supporting those who have faced domestic abuse, with mental health needs, or experienced Modern Slavery.
Ann will be at SCUC at 6:30pm on Wed 24th March, so feel free to drop them off them – or Sue or I can collect them and drop them off for you. If you would prefer to make a donation for us to buy some eggs to drop to Ann, please let Sue, Robert or I know.
- If restrictions are reduced in line with Government Guidance, St Paul's is aiming to reopen on the 18th April – as Covid-secure as we can be. We will be able to confirm nearer the time, with strong reminders about the importance of our risk assessment and how we need to behave to keep everyone safe!
- Daffodils for Mothering Sunday & Palm Crosses for Palm Sunday (28th March) – delivered with love!

'Love divine, all loves excelling'

sung by Scottish Festival Singers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPbD2G3i-7Y>

Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heav'n, to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art.
Visit us with thy salvation;
enter ev'ry trembling heart.

Come, Almighty, to deliver,
let us all thy life receive.
Suddenly return, and never,
nevermore they temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.

Finish, then, thy new creation;
true and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee.
Changed from glory into glory,
till in heav'n we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise.

Words: Charles Wesley

Sending Forth & Blessing

*May the Lord who brought us all to birth,
strengthen us for daily life.*

May the Lord who provides for all our needs sustain us day by day.

*May the Lord whose steadfast love is for all,
send us out to live and work for others.*

*And the blessing of God Almighty, Parent, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be with us and remain with us always.*

Closing Music –

‘God so loved the world’ – John Stainer

Sung by Choir of St Paul’s Cathedral Choir

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5Akz6J8Rw0>

All words and music used with permission
CCLI: 212639
CCL Streaming License: 199867