

Sermon – Parish of Oxton St Saviour

Mothering Sunday 2020

This Sunday is special for a number of reasons.

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Lent – in the middle ages it was called Laetare Sunday, Rejoice Sunday.

Laetare Sunday was a kind of half-time break in Lent – a little bit of festivity to keep up morale. ‘Easter is coming!’

It’s called Rejoice Sunday because the entrance hymn in the medieval rite contained these words:

Rejoice, O Jerusalem: and come together all you that love her: [...] I rejoiced when they said to me: ‘Let us go to God's House!’

Rejoice Sunday!

Today is also Mothering Sunday. During the 16th century, people used to return to their mother church for a service on this Sunday – most often the church where they were baptized. When you did this, people said that you had gone ‘a-mothering’.

When grown up children lived and worked at a distance from their parents, this Sunday was sometimes the only time in the year when the whole family met up. So this day also developed into a day for bringing a present home to your mother.

So Mothering Sunday can be a day of joy for us. It’s right that we ‘rejoice with those who rejoice’ today (Rom. 12.15) as, in many families, children and mothers express their love and affection. But today can be a day of pain too – for those who are separated from their mothers, or who have lost children. It can be a day of pain for those who did not choose to be childless but find themselves childless nonetheless.

Perhaps we can all find some joy in today's celebration of motherhood as we recall that 'it takes a village to raise a child' (Nigerian proverb). At different points in our lives, we might be called to 'motherhood' in different ways.

So we have seen that today has had a special significance for our forebears in the faith, and that significance echoes still for us.

But it's also true that *this* Sunday, Laetare Sunday 2020, will find a place in the history books. People will speak of today long after our lips have fallen silent. Today, the church buildings of England have no services in them. The last time that our churches stood locked on a Sunday was 800 years ago, when the Pope excommunicated King John – and all England with him.

Today, it's not just in England. Most of the world's churches stand empty today. And that has never happened in 2,000 years. 'I rejoiced when they said to

me, “Let us go to God’s House,” the psalmist writes. But this Sunday, almost no-one is able to go to God’s house.

All of us feel this pain. And yet even in this pain there is, I believe, an invitation to broaden our horizons. In his letter to the Ephesians, St Paul teaches us that we are

members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Eph. 2.20-22)

St Paul is teaching us here that we are God’s Temple. It is God’s People gathered together for worship, or gathered together in service, who are God’s Temple, the place where God dwells on earth.

Today, we gather for the Eucharist via the internet.

We cannot be together physically today, but we gather nonetheless, with the help of technology – we are gathering together to worship God.

And so for us too, today can be Laetare Sunday. We too can rejoice because as we have come together via the internet, we are together ‘entering’ God’s House once again.

As St John tells the story, Christ founded the Christian community as he hung on the Cross. ‘Behold thy son.’ ‘Behold thy mother.’ These are the foundation deeds of the Church – because, for Christ, the church is first of all his family: the family he founded and in which he is the head. And this family is most truly itself when it is gathered at the foot of Christ’s cross.

This is the real reason why we celebrate the Eucharist on a Sunday. The Eucharist brings us to the foot of the

Cross. The Eucharist is how we remember just how much God loves us. God loves us enough to die for us.

There may be dark days ahead of us all this year. We are socially distancing in an attempt to slow the pace of infection transfer. Some of us are self-isolating because we belong to groups who are particularly vulnerable to this new virus which is sweeping the world.

And this is happening across the globe. We see today how small the world really is and how interconnected we really are. And we see our powerlessness. The human race in the 21st century likes to pretend that it is master of all it surveys. But deep down we know that we are not.

There may be dark days ahead for us all this year. This pandemic is forcing us apart physically. It is already causing great suffering and loss of life, and there is much worse to come before it gets better.

But perhaps this virus will also bring us closer together too – as a family of nations, but also in our neighbourhoods and our communities.

Today, and every day, God calls us closer to him. God bids you come and stand with his People at the foot of the Cross. Come and see for yourself how much God loves you.

In all the anxiety and even fear of these days, God's love for his People will never run dry. Indeed, Christ himself tells us that this love of God for his People 'becomes in them a spring of water, welling up into eternal life (John 4.14).

Rev Dr J Kennedy, 2020