

"I WILL NOT FORGET YOU"
Isaiah 49:8-18

Mothering Sunday – the day when we reflect on our mothers and their love for their children. Maybe we remember mothers who are no longer with us. Maybe we think about mothers who are geographically distant from us. Maybe we are thinking now about the mothers we will see later today – for lunch or tea – or will talk to on the 'phone. And, at least today, we'll make an effort to think about those who have showed love to us in some way or other – even if they have found it difficult or struggled to express it as we would have liked.

And the depth and reach of that love which we see in nearly all parent-child relationships means that when it is missing we find it shocking. Stories of abuse and abandonment make headlines in our newspapers and news bulletins because they are such aberrations. There are usually one or two such reports in the papers at this time of year as a mother goes off to Ibiza leaving her toddler in a high rise flat with enough food to keep him going for a couple of weeks. And we read of very young babies abandoned on doorsteps or outside police stations. A parent who for some reason or other seems to want to forget about or abuse their child is one of the most demonised characters in our heavily child-centred culture. And that's always been the case.

In the words we've just read from the Old Testament book of *Isaiah*, it's one of the central images. There are times when a mother finds herself in such extremity that she forgets the child who is still sucking at her breast. And Zion, Jerusalem, the people of God, start to believe that God has forgotten them. Things have gone very wrong in their situation. The inhabitants of that city, thought by them to be holy and impregnable; men and women who consider themselves to be somehow especially blessed by God, are finding themselves attacked and humiliated by the surrounding nations, overwhelmed by the military might of the great Babylonian empire. Why is it happening to them? Why is God not intervening to save them and restore their fortunes?

But the prophet Isaiah stands up and says that, despite what appears to be happening to them, God has not forgotten them – he cannot forget them. Even if a mother should forget her baby – that event that is so rare it makes the headlines – God will not forget the people he loves. Yes, things are tough. Yes, the people are experiencing the consequences of their own rebellion. Yes, their heritage seems to be lying in ruins. But God has not forgotten them. God **cannot** forget them. There is a great future ahead of them: we read of that in the sentences just after the passage we read.

And God cannot forget them because he has them "*engraved on his hands*". They are tattooed on his hands, following the custom of the peoples of the area at that time. Today it's more likely that the name of a loved one will be tattooed on your bicep or forearm, but then it was on the palm of the hand. And there was no way of removing it them. (Today you can have expensive laser treatment to get a tattoo off, but then it was there for keeps.) God could not forget those he loved, his own people because every time he looked at his hands there was the reminder of them. He loved them. He was not going to let them down. He was not going to allow them ultimately to disappear.

As we struggle with the ups and downs of life, we can sometimes begin to feel that God has forgotten us. Whether it's believers (if you want to put it like that) who are experiencing difficulties that they think should no longer affect them, or whether it's not-yet-believers who look around and conclude from the state of the world that God has abandoned it, we can find ourselves asking, "Where is God? Why is he not doing something?" Even Jesus had his moment of asking why God seemed to have abandoned him.

Life is tough, let's make no bones about it. Things don't go as we'd like them to and we find ourselves grappling with problems of health, employment, relationships, finance and all the rest. Looking at the wider world, we see crime and violence, depravity and degradation, famine and disease. We may think things are getting worse, but it's always been like that in some way or other. Where's God? Why will he not do something? Has he forgotten us?

No, he hasn't. He cannot. I believe that he is still watching over us, watching over our world. His heart torn like the heart of a mother who has had to watch her child grow up and walk away. But he still loves, even when he has been rejected by his people. How do we know? How **can** we know that he still cares, that he has not forgotten? "*Lift up your eyes*", says the prophet. Tear your gaze away from the self-pitying obsession with yourself and look up. Look up to Golgotha, to Calvary, to the cross. Look up to the spectacle of a suffering God, pinned by the creatures of his own making to a cross of wood. Look up at his suffering, at his agony, at his humiliation – and hear the words from his chapped and bloodied lips, "*Father, forgive them*".

There's the answer to the question asked by so many people down through the centuries: "Why doesn't God do something?" He has. He has. God has intervened in the life of this world, intervened to make a difference. There on the cross he wrestled with the forces of evil so that you and I do not need to. There on the cross he took on and defeated the power of death. There on the cross he dealt with the eternal consequences of all our wrong decisions and wrong choices, all our rebellion and rejection. He has not forgotten us – and he never will.

Engraved on his hands are the reminders of his love for you and for me. As he showed his friends in the hours after his resurrection, in the centre of his palms he bears the marks of those nails that held him to the cross. Every time he looks at those hands he is reminded of what he went through because of his extraordinary love. And here this morning this bread and wine remind us of just how powerful is his love for us. God loves you – never, ever forget that. You matter to him. You matter to him even more than a baby matters to her mother, difficult though that may be to appreciate.

And it makes no difference who you are – young or old, male or female, rich or poor, an upstanding citizen or a rebellious and anti-social outsider. God loves you. Those marks on Jesus' hands are for you. In a few moments, though, you'll hold in your hand a piece of bread and a small cup of wine. They are reminders of that sacrifice that Jesus made for you, of the enormous lengths God went to to let you know that you are not forgotten.

He died for you, rejected and alone. Above all the other possible concerns and considerations he had, while he hung there on the cross, Jesus thought of you above all else. That's the kind of love you cannot ignore. God says to you, "*I will not forget you. See, it's etched into the palms of my hands.*"

Questions for discussion

1. What is it about a mother's love that we find so special? Why are we so shocked when it turns to cruelty or neglect?
2. Jesus felt that God had abandoned him as he hung on the cross. Why do you think that was? Had God really abandoned him?
3. Have you ever felt that God had abandoned you or that God didn't care? Was that before or after you became a Christian?
4. What do you say to people who ask you why God does nothing to alleviate suffering in our world?
5. What gives you the assurance that God has not abandoned you? How can communion help in that?