

The Love That Never Lets Us Go

INTRO: Our theme for this 9 a.m. on Mothering Sunday in season of Lent = 'The Love that never lets us go'.

The earliest Mother's Day celebrations can be traced back to the spring celebrations of ancient Greece in honour of Rhea, the mother of the gods. During the 17th century England celebrated a day called 'Mothering Sunday' on this day, the 4th Sunday in Lent, in honour of the mothers of England.

During this time, many of England's poor worked as servants for the wealthy. As most jobs were located far from their homes, the servants would have the day off & were encouraged to return home and spend the day with their mothers. A special cake, called the mothering cake, was often brought along to provide a festive touch.

As Christianity spread, the celebration changed to honour 'Mother Church' – the spiritual power that gave them life and protected them from harm. Over time the church festival blended with the Mothering Sunday celebration. People began honouring their mothers, as well as the church. And this weekend, people up & down the land will be honouring the flower, chocolate & greetings card trade & hopefully mum as well!... > MP 515 'O love that wilt not let me go,'

So for this morning, I've chosen FOUR OT READINGS that give us four pictures of God.

As we hear them, each will show God, not the traditional image of God as the elderly father figure with beard, but a definite FEMALE slant, if not an actual image – God as mother. Go into any theological bookshop today & you will find an increasingly large section on shelves marked 'Feminist Theology'.

And in midst of the continuing debate over PC & feminist theology & all that – what is paramount is that the love that is remembered, celebrated & worshipped here every Sunday is an INCLUSIVE love. And we note in passing that 'feminist theology' has its origins in the OT.

FOUR PICTURES then, imagine ourselves in an art gallery, stop & pause to consider each one. 1st READING – Is.66 vv7-13...

From the final chapter of Isaiah & from that section of Isaiah that is rarely preached on. The final section of Isaiah (55-66) is all about RESTORATION – of Jerusalem post exile – and of the people of God – their identity and calling. Above all, here we find a reaffirmation of the love & presence of God for the people of God.

Here in Is.66 we see God first as 'midwife' helping to give (re) birth to the nation – God brings 'deliverance' in every sense of the word. Then we see God described as nursing mother – centre of the child's universe. God is the life-giving, nourishing, tender, protective parent.

On the day when mums might at very least have had breakfast in bed, or one lot of washing up done for them, such imagery of God as loving parent is a very powerful one – for all who

have been on the giving & receiving end of such devotion in own family life. And the opposite is also true – this is a very difficult image for any who have known unhappiness – or worse in family life.

SING: 'King of kings, majesty'

2nd READING – Is.49 vv15 & 16 ...

My God, my God why have you forsaken me – the cry from the cross (quoting a psalm) & it is also the cry of God's people in time of darkness & despair.

Here in Is.49 – we travel back some years in Israel's history – feelings of abandonment – cut off from God. Not so, says the prophet, how can the mother ever forget the baby that she has borne (ring bells for mums - & dads here?).

A few weeks before we moved from Essex – came home mid morning – note from Dorothy – Charlotte referred on by GP to Broomfield hospital Chelmsford. Small exterior growth at base of spine – bleeding. I joined them in casualty – admitted for minor operation. That meant a very anxious wait for a daughter never been in hospital – let alone face general anaesthetic & op. Over 5 & half hours wait on a Wednesday evening before finally taken to theatre at 10.20 p.m. Charlotte was old enough to sign the consent form – but still needed her parents at bedside. It was still distressing for parents to see their 'baby' anxiously waiting...Other occasions since - as probably for most of us here this morning..

As with this passage from Is. there will be times when we too feel abandoned by God – cut off from his love, his presence, and his power. In course of pastoral work in ministry, I met & ministered to such people. In such times we will need the same comfort described here – probably not in the form described here – prophetic words – at least not exclusively. Instead the 'parenthood' of God is expressed in presence of people of God in Jesus Christ – the Church. To experience the same commitment & depth of love as shown in these verses.

As a result, many come through, strengthened & encouraged by such love show in times of darkness.

Sadly, others do not – never make it through the dark times & feel a permanent sense of God's abandonment.

OFFERING..

3rd READING – Psalm 22 vv9-11...

Here then is an extract from that psalm, which Jesus quotes on the cross ('My God, my God...'). Here again is the same imagery of God as midwife – who from moment of birth & new birth cares for & loves the child. The piteous cry of v 11 'Do not be far from me. For trouble is near & there is no one to help.' I recall Charlotte's description of screens round her bed – sense of being cut off from the world.

The psalmist in 22 also feels cut off totally – abandoned & yet there is – as in many similar psalms – a struggle going on in mind of psalmist.

Faith is not completely extinguished – a spark of it is kindled here. Through prayer a lifeline

is established, and the hand of God reaches out & grasps hold of writer.

‘Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord... Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

That is the kind of self-sacrificial love which every mother knows & it is demonstrated supremely in Cross of Christ. Here on 4th Sunday in Lent, we are journeying ever closer towards Jerusalem – journey’s end & its beginning.

SING: ‘O perfect love, O perfect sacrifice.’

One more (beautiful) OT image of love of God – 4th reading Hosea 11vv1-4...

How many here can remember that moment – as parent encouraging infant to take those first steps – baby was suddenly mobile & life would never be the same again!

‘When Israel was a child, I loved him – it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms, but they did not realise it was I who healed them.

One of the pains of parenthood are those times when offspring (of whatever age!) are rebellious, refusing to recognise the love & concern of parent, as other distractions & loyalties crowd out the original ones. As the child grows, finds its feet – so he/she goes own way. Parental love in one sense does have to know when ‘to let go’.

So with rebellious Israel, as she grew as a nation, more & more under influence of foreign gods (background of Hosea). ‘How can I give you up?’ is the question asked a few verses further on – love that will not let go. Whether we address God as Father (as taught by Jesus!), or Mother or ‘Our Heavenly Parent’ (which heaven may forbid!) – what underlies such terminology = the persevering love of God.

In the process of ‘bringing up baby’ – one that never ends – there may be times of rebellion, even rejection – but the parents go on loving. As we read through OT, we find time & again periods of Israel’s faithlessness towards the God of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob. And for all that some would say that (words of the cliché): ‘The God of OT is a God of wrath & God of NT is a God of love’, we find throughout OT as well, the same persevering, unconditional love that we now journey towards at Calvary.

QUOTE from Student's testimony...

From time to time, we ALL need reminding of that unconditional parental love of God. Each time we come into this holy place, each time we look upon the cross, each time come to this table – so we come once again face to face with the unconditional love of God in Christ - reminder from Ian two weeks ago at last Communion 9 a.m.

So Holy Week draws ever closer once again. And, yes the shadow of the cross looms ever larger. But beyond is resurrection light & resurrection Easter joy.

A great 'luxury' & privilege for me to be preaching again on Easter Day this year – at Polesworth Baptist Church. Easter morning when PBC, Wade St, Cathedral, Methodists, Life

Church & global Church will greet the love that bursts forth from the empty tomb. – the love that bears all things - the love that calls us by name - the love that will never let us go.

The love that is ultimately revealed in Christ crucified, risen & reigning – summed up in this familiar passage from 1st letter of John:

FINAL READING: 1 John 4 vv7-12.

'And God created mothers' READING.