Mothering Sunday-Church as our Mother

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Lent 4 C – Lk 15 11-32 – The Prodigal Son

I wonder what his Mum told that younger son after the feast. Maybe something like this?

'The day you left, you broke all our hearts. Dad couldn't speak at all for days. Then month after month, he sat outside watching for you; just gave your brother and the servants their orders in the morning, then sat there watching, silent again.

I couldn't do anything to bring him out of it. I could hardly get up in the morning myself. And your brother just got angrier and angrier. Every dinner time, I had to shut him up when he'd start ranting about what you must have been getting up to.

I don't know what made Dad give you all that money. When I asked him, he'd just say you wanted him dead before his time. If you didn't want to be with him – if you wanted to live as if he were dead – what was the point of holding on to you? You demanded that he give you your share of our family property. You didn't want to wait for it. So Dad said "It's only money. Better to give you what you want; let you go, and hope you come to your senses before you get hurt".

He regretted it the minute you were gone. We couldn't sleep for worry about where you might be; what might be happening to you.

Dad stopped going to sit with his old friends in the market. He couldn't face them – didn't want to hear the angry gossip

about you – off in some foreign land full of strange people. What would they want with a fool like him anyway; a shamed man amongst honourable, sensible people?

Then the drought came; no food anywhere, no work for anyone. 'What if he's starving!' he'd say, over and over. 'Please God; bring him home alive!?' Watching; watching: as if his hope and love could somehow keep you alive. I can't bear to remember it' …

Let's leave her in peace for a moment.

Their younger son wanted everything that comes with belonging, but without having to belong. That's common now in affluent countries where personal freedom is valued more highly than community. This living without belonging was unimaginable in the world of the parable – and in most of today's world too. The younger son's actions and attitudes rejected the core human value of belonging. But I fear he doesn't shock us the way he shocked his own people. And if so, I wonder what that says about *us*.

In character, when he hits rock bottom, he thinks of a way to return home on *his* terms. As a hired servant, he can live apart from the family. He *still* doesn't get relationship. Let's listen to his Mum describe the homecoming.

'The day you came home, boys from the next village rushed into our marketplace yelling out that you were coming back. A crowd started to gather; angry and ready with bitter words. Some held rotten fruit; a few held stones.

Dad saw all this and rushed out to get to you first. He didn't care what people thought of him; he could only think of how bad you must feel, and how he had to protect you. The servants and I couldn't keep up with him. Just as the first hand was raised to throw a stone, he reached you; hugged you; shielded you; kissed you. He ignored their angry words; he ignored your apologies; just yelled to the servants to run back and get his

cloak, his ring and some sandals for you. He announced a great party: the whole village must come and celebrate with him.'

That embrace and the kiss were public signs of reconciliation. They were given before the son could give his prepared speech. That's grace at work. Their relationship was restored by the grace of the father alone; certainly not by the son's prepared speech.

Later, we meet the older brother. It was for people like him that Jesus told this parable. Pharisees and Scribes were grumbling about Jesus saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them'". The older brother grumbled like they did. He grumbled about his Dad welcoming his ratbag of a brother home and eating with him.

In telling those *older-brother* Pharisees and scribes this parable, Jesus did for them exactly what the Dad did for the older son when he humiliated himself again before his village by leaving the feast to beg yet another insolent son to come in. Jesus reached out to these older-brother types; upstanding people, certain of their inheritance and sure that God should damn other people. Jesus wanted them inside the love; not locked out by their rage; stopped by their arrogant refusal to come in and eat with him and the people they shunned. In this parable, Jesus tried to show those *older-brother* Pharisees and Scribes that God longs for us all to be inside, all together.

But it's Mothering Sunday, isn't it. Most often when I meet someone who forgives and trusts beyond all reason, that person is a mother.

So perhaps this story of this compassionate, forgiving father is right for Mothering Sunday. It's a story which reminds us that this foolish grace – always ready to forgive, to trust; always determined to keep the connection alive, and always ready to bear the cost of it all – that this foolish grace that mothers find the strength to summon up, over and over

again, is a wonderful way to help us understand the nature of God. When we think today of the Church as our Mother, and that she must be Mother to our children as she has been to us, gracious, trusting and tenacious, it’s good to spend time with this story to learn the nature of that Mother whom we must now embody ourselves.

Amen.