

Mothering Sunday

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Lent 4 C: Mothering Sunday Lk 15 11-32

On Mothering Sunday, it seems a bit inappropriate that we're given a Gospel reading about a father and his two sons. So I wonder what the Mum might say quietly to her son after his return. Maybe this...

'The day you left, you broke all our hearts. Dad couldn't speak at all for days. 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 ordered him to give you your one-third 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 sitting there, 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 while. She doesn't want to re-live that horror.

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 – where the link between belonging and survival is so obvious. The younger son's actions and attitudes rejected the core human value of belonging.

That inheritance he demanded belonged to his future; to his children; not just to him. But he wanted it now, and purely for himself. That's the make-believe world of today's credit cards; the self-centred world of advertising slogans about how much we *deserve* things; how we should *reward* ourselves—reward for what, I have no idea. What can we deserve that exceeds the gifts of our life and our world? The younger son was a child of our sort of society. So he doesn't shock us the way he shocked his own people. I wonder what that says about *us*?

That's why we may not really get how astonishing his Dad's response is. The Gospel says he divided his life (*ton bion*) between the sons. (The son had asked for *ousios* substance, but the father gave *bion*) So who's the real prodigal here? The Dad, who recklessly divided his life between his sons long before he died. Could they be trusted to care for him in old

age? The Dad doesn't ask. He sets aside his rights, gives up his freedom, and risks his future. Precisely the opposite of the son who asserts his rights, demands his freedom and seizes his future.

In time, the son suffers the consequences of his choices. He loses his rights, his freedom and his future. Then amongst the pigs, hungry, he thinks of a scheme that'll mean he can eat again—but on *his* terms. As a hired servant, he'll live apart from the family with independent means. He *still* doesn't get relationship. He returns home thinking like this.

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.'

The embrace and the kiss were public signs of reconciliation, and were given before the son could finish his prepared speech. That's grace at work. The relationship of father and son was restored entirely by the grace of the father, not by the bargaining or repentance of the son.

We're about to meet the older brother again, but first, let's pause and ask why Jesus told this parable. Do you remember the beginning of the chapter?

... “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them’”. The older brother grumbled in exactly the same way as 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 guests by leaving the feast to beg yet another insolent son to come in. Jesus reached out to these older-brother types; upstanding people who were certain of their inheritance, but equally 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. The parable also tells us younger son types that God allows us to find that out for ourselves. We’re all loved alike; both blinkered selfish younger brother-types, and self-righteous, judgemental older brother-types.

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 after all. 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

Mothering Sunday Cake and Posy Blessing

Father God, giver of all joy:

We ask that you bless this cake and these posies, that they may be to us symbols of our communion with you and with each other. As they were once scattered over our land as blossoms and blooms, grasses, vines, trees and cane yet are now one, so let us in our diversity be your one redeemed people, and your delight. Amen.