

SERMON FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT – YEAR B

Almighty God, we thank you for your holy word. May it be a lantern to our feet, a light to our paths, and strength to our lives, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

An Aspect of our Lenten observances that is being increasingly overlooked is our observance of Mothering Sunday on the fourth Sunday of Lent.

In the 16th century, Mothering Sunday was less about mothers and more about church. Back then, people would make a journey to their ‘mother’ church once a year. This might have been their home church, their nearest cathedral or a major parish church in a bigger town.

Another tradition was to allow servants and workers a day off to visit their mothers and go to their home church and brought their mothers gifts such as hand-picked flowers.

Mothering Sunday falls in the middle of Lent and it was traditional for people to relax their fasting on this day, which is where the tradition of the Simnel cake comes from.

By the early 20th century celebrating Mothering Sunday had waned in many places, but the establishment of Mother's Day in the United States brought about renewed interest.

In Australia and the US, Mother's Day is celebrated on the second Sunday of May each year. Mother's Day is still celebrated on the fourth Sunday in Lent in many places, including the UK.

Mothering Sunday is a time for us all to and to celebrate and recognise the women who have nurtured and cared for us throughout our lives.

Our readings for the Fourth Sunday in Lent also recognise that we have a divine parent who cares for us and whose love is without limit.

We join John's gospel today at verse 14 of chapter, which seems a bit odd, because there is no context to what Jesus is saying in these verses. The first part of chapter three, which for some reason is not included, tells how Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to see Jesus "at night". John places this meeting shortly after last week's gospel reading about the Cleansing of the Temple. Nicodemus asked Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him".

Then follows a conversation with Nicodemus about the meaning of being "born again" or "born from above". Nicodemus explores the notion of being literally born again from one's mother's womb. Jesus expresses surprise, perhaps ironically, that "a teacher of Israel" does not understand the concept of spiritual rebirth. It is at this point that we pick up our Gospel reading this evening / today.

We join the conversation at verse 14 with Jesus saying, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." The context for these words is in our Old Testament reading for today from the Book of Numbers. In Numbers, chapter 21, the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness following the Exodus from Egypt. And they are growing impatient hiking around the Sinai Peninsula year after year.

They don't like the food and there's not enough water. And so, they start grumbling against God, and his chosen servant, Moses. In response, we are told that God sent "poisonous serpents among the people." This seems to stop the people's grumbling, because they have a more imminent and serious danger to worry about. Instead of complaining about the food, they started praying to God to be relieved of the poisonous serpents. In response to the prayers of the people, God told Moses to "'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' That is the story that John has in mind in our Gospel reading for today: just as Moses lifted up a bronze serpent to cure people bitten by the snakes, so the fourth Evangelist is writing about the way God loved the world: God lifted up Jesus in the same manner that Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Then comes the much loved and much used verse 16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." Jesus says in this statement that God is fundamentally a God of love, that love is the reasoning by which the kingdom of God runs, and that God's love trumps everything else in the end. And so often, unfortunately, this verse is used by Christians not to communicate God's all-encompassing compassion and mercy, but to threaten unbelievers with God's judgment. Christians have had a tendency to concentrate not on the 'God so loved' bit and instead concentrate on the 'not perish' part. But if you read on to the next verse Jesus, goes further, by stating that, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." The "judgment" to come is not punishment but is simply the dilemma that those who will not come out of the darkness for fear of the light will have.

Jesus is saying in effect that people can either choose to follow the light that will lead them out of darkness, or to stay in the darkness. The choice is theirs.

God's mercy is clearly shown in the lifting up of Jesus on the cross, the visible sign of God's love poured out for the world. And we have a choice as to whether we receive God's love in Jesus, or whether we continue to go our own way, to continue stumbling in the darkness, walking away from the light.

John 3:16 is a beautiful passage of scripture, and it is a verse which encapsulates the heart of the Gospel message. But the life of faith it calls us to is not the narrow, judgemental faith that so often makes up the message of the Church. As we celebrate the love of mothers on Mothering Sunday today, we also celebrate and rejoice that the love of God cannot be restricted and confined, it is open and endless and points us to a greater and far more immeasurable idea of God than our often-narrow minds can ever imagine.