

Address

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo.

"So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide.

All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

Those words from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy seem to hold a certain poignancy for us at the moment, don't they?

We are indeed living in strange and unprecedented times, as the Coronavirus has put a halt to so much of what we consider to be normal daily life. And I expect all of us echo Frodo's wish that it wouldn't have happened at all in our time.

For many, these will be deeply troubling and upsetting days.

But it's also Mothering Sunday, a day when we celebrate all of those who have offered us care and compassion throughout our lives, whether that's actual mothers or people who have given us 'mothering', the gift of love and care.

Mothering Sunday is a source of joy and celebration, as we give thanks for mothers everywhere, but also of pain, as we recognise that family life is seldom easy, and there are people everywhere who feel the pain of loss of mothering in so many ways -

- those who have been unable to have children,
- those whose mothers who have died,
- those who have difficult relationships with their mothers,
- and those who are separated from loved ones for one reason or another - which today of course is most of us.

Although, we rightly now use it to celebrate the contribution of mothers everywhere, Mothering Sunday isn't really about mothers at all in its origins.

Originally it was a time where people celebrated and gave thanks for the 'Mother Church', and was the Sunday on which they returned to their home churches where they'd been baptised.

So that's why, of course, this Mothering Sunday takes on an added poignancy today, as we're unable to go to our local churches at all.

My guess is that many of you are tuning in because usually you'd be in church, and today we can't meet together because of the restrictions on public worship.

And so we are finding other ways of worshipping, and praying, and being churches, and this Radio service is one of those many ways.

But it's strange isn't it? It feels unusual and peculiar at best. Even painful. Meeting together with our fellow worshippers is something those of us who do it often (or even occasionally) value so much. And for the time being we're denied that act of being together in person.

So this comes with a warm welcome to all of you listening in to this service from your homes around Cumbria. It is so good to be worshipping with you today.

Now you'd be forgiven for thinking that the gospel reading we just heard is a slightly odd one to have on Mothering Sunday - The Crucifixion?

It is what's set as the reading for today in the church's calendar, but it does seem at first glance to be a bit gloomy, a bit depressing. Surely that reading is for Good Friday? We could cope with it then! Why today can't we have something a little more promising, with spring and flowers and sunshine - and hope?

Perhaps the reason that reading is set for this day is that it describes really accurately the bittersweet reality of love and loss that is most people's experience of mothering, and indeed of family life in general.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, alongside his mother's sister; his friend, Mary Magdalene; and his closest friend John. Together they look on as Jesus suffers and dies on the cross.

And even as Jesus hung there on the cross, in his love and care for us, dying for the sins of the whole world, he was concerned to make sure that, after his death, his mother would have someone to care for and someone to care for her.

And so he commended Mary and John to each other. "*Woman, here is your son.*", "*John, Here is your mother.*"

And there, underneath the cross, a new family is born.

- a family not based on blood ties or nuclear family relationships, but on mutual devotion to the One on the cross above them, under the shadow of its suffering.

Jesus' death on the cross makes possible new relationships and breaks down barriers, between humankind and God, and between us all.

That's what the cross of Christ shows us. The cross is the very opposite of social distancing. The cross shows us that God has come very near to us in Jesus Christ.

The coming days, weeks, months are likely to be difficult for all of us. But wouldn't it be wonderful if new ways of being family were to be born out of this time of suffering?

We've already had to find new and different ways of relating to each other, when we can't meet together in person, or shake hands, or go about our normal business.

Meetings are now being conducted online.
Waves and smiles have replaced handshakes.

Services are taken online, and new ways of praying and communicating are being found.

Different ties are connecting us now, and binding us together; new ways of being, of relating, of being family and community.

Our other reading was an extract from the letter of St Paul to the Colossians, and it gives us some very good guidance for how to be with each other, in these tough times of physical distancing.

Paul was writing from a prison cell to a small and struggling church. Just as we are being encouraged in these days to look out for our neighbours, and particularly those in our communities who are most vulnerable, so Paul encourages them to "*clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience - and love*".

He tells them they are to forgive each other, when they let each other down.

And I wonder, if he were writing today, whether he'd say; "*only buy the toilet roll you need, and don't stockpile food - make sure there's enough left for those who need it most*".

He also encourages them in their worship together. He says they are to "*teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in their hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God*."

In these days when our communal worship in church buildings must cease, we'll need to find new ways of worshipping together, new ways of being the church.

Not being able to meet in our church buildings reminds us that church is not the building. The church is the people who gather, and then scatter into our everyday lives, all those who trust and follow Jesus Christ, and we will need to learn to sing a new song with gratitude in our hearts.

And so perhaps these days will show us again that we are God's church *wherever* we are. The church is not closing, the church is changing.

And in this lies great opportunity.

We may indeed wish Coronavirus had not happened in our time, but we can decide to choose wisely what to do with this time that is given to us.

And so on this most unusual of Mothering Sundays, my prayer is that, under the shadow of suffering, a new community will be born, a community of people the length and breadth of Cumbria who, even whilst scattered, gather together in Spirit, under the shadow of the Cross, and discover together the new kind of family Jesus calls us to be.

Let us pray

Loving God, you are one God,
and you bring together what is scattered
and mend what is broken.
Unite us with the scattered peoples of the earth
that we may be one family of your children.
Bind up all our wounds
and heal us in spirit,
that we may be renewed as disciples of Jesus Christ,
our Master and Saviour.
And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always. Amen.