

mother church
a sermon preached on the
fourth sunday in lent
11 March 2018
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by fr ken hewlett

the lections: Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3: 14-21.

Last Thursday most of the world observed international Women's Day—an opportunity to reflect on the role of women in our lives. On this mid-point in the season of Lent the Church of England keeps what is known throughout the United Kingdom as Mothering Sunday, an observance that is more than Mother's Day; talking about Mothering Sunday might seem a bit quaint in contemporary church life in Australia and there would probably be only a handful of parishes that observe it today in our country, but this day is not only about our mothers, it is also about the church.

The idea of Mother Church has a longer history than that of Mothering Sunday. One of the early church fathers Cyprian in the 3rd century said; 'No one can have God for his father who does not have the church for his mother.' We often speak about the church as family, but that can sometimes make unmarried people, single parents and those who want to get away from too many emotional ties, feel excluded. Church as mother is inclusive. It is there for everybody, accompanying us on our journey through life, as personified by Mary the mother of Jesus. And since our stages of life and faith need to be handled with tact and patience, the church as mother complements the masculine way of being church—as combative, resolute and vigorous. So let us this morning follow the phases of Mother Church through life's journey.

What is it that gives us a map of who we are and where we belong, that forms and acclimatises us from infancy to the mysterious world we enter? What is it that consoles and entertains and extends the growing child? Surely it is stories told by our mothers that give us our sense of place and belonging? We live our lives out of the stories we have learnt. Indeed we are made by the stories. Above all it is the story of God's life with us, with Jesus as its climax, passed on by mothers at home, which has nurtured the faith and hope of generations.

But new generations are growing up in ignorance of the Christian story. The erosion of Christian piety in family life, especially in the lives of women, has lost a major source of Christian story telling in the home. Nothing apparently has replaced it—so many people today are searching for a story to be part of—our cinemas fill up, bookshops seem to have an ever expanding list of human stories, interest in genealogies is insatiable and soap operas on the TV have become a significant shared experience in many people's lives. What they have in common is the search for story because unless our lives become stories they have no meaning.

Mother Church is the storytelling community. It is the guardian of the greatest story every told. Some times we have been so hooked on to doctrines that we've neglected the world of imagination and story. But while doctrines are statements on a page, stories are events in life. It is as if when we are given space to share our own stories that we begin to locate ourselves within the continuing story of the life of Jesus. As we do so, Jesus becomes part of our story, redeeming and enlarging it so that we can find ourselves as part of the bigger story of the life of God.

The church as storyteller makes possible the rebirth of our imagination. But that becomes a reality only when we experience church as midwife. Where love is pervasive, people care enough to attend to the pain in the eyes of others, and others are glad to see you

not because you occupy another space in the pew but because you are you, there is the cradle of new life. The church is midwife because birth is ultimately God's work. It knows it is not there to implant life, but to induce and release the life that is there. The church as midwife knows that Christian life follows a long gestation period within a loving and convivial environment. It will not artificially force the pace but it knows when an intervention is necessary to bring life to a person who is immobilised by indecision and fear. It has no desire to produce clones that think and act like one another. Instead the church as midwife respects the otherness of each person, with all his or her individuality and difference, even when that makes common life more turbulent and uncomfortable. New life is God's gift, as unpredictable and mysterious as our own journey to life and consciousness. We cannot contrive it or comprehend it, but the church that reflects God's love will procreate this new life.

Mother Church is involved not only in birthing but also in nurturing. We have no right to encourage birth unless we can provide nurture. Churches that are good at one may not be so good at the other. New life is like a tender fragile seed; it has to be nurtured through the ages and stages of life. Knowing that well-nourished plants will eventually need a larger pot, it is tempting to attempt to short circuit the regular re-planting process and go straight into the large pots suitable for full-grown plants. When this happens the plants usually wither away. People, as well as plants, cannot handle too much space and freedom. The church as nurturer has to produce rich, diverse, graduated opportunities for people to be formed in Christ's likeness through their stages of life. And we need to know that we will be supported when our lives unravel, when we lose the plot, and when our faith is plagued by doubt and crisis. The church as nurturer is concerned principally to prepare and resource its people for the dispersed Christian witness at work, at home, and leisure. Those who collapse into church dependency and fatigue after exercising heavy responsibility in the wider community need to know that they will be held and supported, without necessarily being given a job to do. Those, by contrast, whose lifestyle is settled and undemanding, must expect to be challenged to costlier discipleship.

But what of those who feel they have outgrown the church itself? Some people at times are diminished by the church, their growth retarded by its structures and traditions. Those in this situation may need the church as the community to stay away from for a while, if they are to have a constructive relationship with her in the future. We shouldn't be surprised. It's like that in many homes, but mother church is the host. People, who wouldn't naturally relate to one another, nevertheless find themselves relating through their instinctive relationship with her. She is the one who is there not for her own sake, but for the sake of others. She is there with a low threshold and open door, never critical or resentful of those who drift in and out, or who 'use' the church, more welcoming to those who are new than to the dutiful elder brothers and sisters who have always been there.

Church as host creates entry points for explorers and pilgrims. Such people do not want some predatory priest asking them to join the membership roll the minute they set foot in the door or to make them feel uncomfortable because they have not attended more regularly. They may want mothering with restrained care, not nannying by over attention. Some time ago when I was ministering in another place a fellow who was clearly moved by his attendance at a church service met one of the people collecting the books. He said to the book collector 'I haven't been to church for 30 years!' The book collector said simply and sincerely; 'Welcome home'. 'That's exactly it,' said the visitor—as his eyes filled with tears.

Mother Church: storyteller, midwife, nurturer, and host. Here is a gift we are given for ourselves, as well as the commission to make it available to one another. Here are new images for a new way of being the church in a new age and culture. Church like mother, will not be redundant; its work will never be done on earth, until we all come home to the God who is both father and mother of us all.