

## **Mothering Sunday sermon – A people of blessing and nurture**

*Exodus 2.1-101*

*Colossians 3.12-17*

*John 19.25-27*

In our service today, Fr Ryan will pray a blessing over the posies beautifully prepared by our flower arranging team which we will then hand out to celebrate Mother's Day.

This sharing of flowers and blessings reflects well how the fourth Sunday of Lent is traditionally when the Church relaxes its Lenten discipline. We are to refresh ourselves in rejoicing, helped by eating Simnel cake. We are to recall that fasting is meant to serve a deeper celebration of the good things we have received. A true Christian discipline is one of joy where we welcome people and things in our lives as blessings. We are also reminded that our true fast is to bless others. More radically, Jesus tells us to "bless those who curse you...." (Lk 6:28). As the first letter of Peter encourages, we should return a blessing for evil, 'because to this you were called, that you might inherit a blessing' (1 Pt 3:9).

What does it mean to be a blessing and to bless? To bless is first something God does. When God bestows his blessings upon us we receive God's action in a way that gives us life, refreshes us, strengthens us – like the rain that waters the earth and the sun that

warms the face of every person. To receive God's blessing is to receive life to its fullest.

A blessing is also something we are called to share. We are to be ministers of God's blessings to each other. We are to bless others, to offer words and gestures that are life-giving, just as we are blessed by others and God.

We are blessed by God. We are called to bless each other. We are also to bless God. 'Bless the Lord, O my soul!' (Psalm 103:1.). We open our hearts and bless God by giving thanks for all the blessings that bring us and others into the fullness of life. We are called to be a people of blessing.

This is given an intimate focus on Mother's Day. Our very capacity to receive God's blessings and bless others cannot be separated from the relationships that nurture us into being. Without wishing to exclude the importance of fathers or other carers, or to deny the difficulties that can affect the relationship between mothers and children, it remains true we owe our being to our mothers in very particular way. They carried us into life in their bodies and hearts. They nurtured us in so many countless and often imperceptible ways, acting as a channel for God's blessing. The blessing of life is something we first receive in and from our mothers.

It is a basic human tradition to give thanks to and for our mothers. We do this today by means of an ancient practice: giving flowers.

This predates Christianity and belongs to many different cultures. There is something wonderfully childlike in this. Children enjoy picking flowers and offering them to someone. Daisies, dandelions, daffodils – beware. You are all gifts in the eyes of a child. The adult mind might balk at this wonton destruction and be rightly concerned with issues of conservation, and whether they come from someone's garden. But to a child, picking flowers and giving them as a gift is obvious. With flowers the child gives their whole heart with carefree abandon. And, of course, adults too know the capacity of flowers to express deeper meanings. We give flowers to thank, to apologize, to mourn, to celebrate, to say I love you.

In fact, flowers already bless God in their very being. Flowers are a blessing of colour, scent, nectar and life. But it is an especially human calling to share the blessing that flowers are in order to bless others. A child who offers flowers to their mother makes a blessing out of a blessing.

I like to imagine that Jesus did the same. We so often see Mary depicted with white lilies, as in the stained glass windows in our Spirit chapel. The traditional interpretation of this is that the lily is a symbol of purity. But I wonder, did the Jesus who liked to talk about the lilies in the field in all their radiant glory also like to pick them as a child and give them to his mother?

On Mother's Day, the church prays for this childlike gift of flowers to be blessed. When Fr Ryan, as a priest, blesses the flowers later in the service, he acts as the representative of Christ, of Christ's church and all God's people who with one voice hallow this simple offering – that it be a blessing of life and nurture to all who receive it.

This deeper sense of a blessing given by the whole Church through the priest in Christ's name is echoed in a profound way when Fr Ryan and other priests offer blessings at certain occasions: blessing a newborn child and its parents; blessing the water of baptism; blessing a couple who get married; blessing those who are sick and dying; blessing a congregation at the end of Eucharistic worship. In the Spirit-filled life of the Church, God's blessings and nurture go hand-in-hand.

It is especially when the Church asks God to bless children that we can glimpse the radical nature of our calling to bless even in the face of suffering. A child is born completely vulnerable to a world of risk and danger. Without denying this, but in more honest awareness of it, the Christian belief is that love and joy are stronger than the curse of violence and terror. In the face of suffering, we are bold to ask for and give blessings. We dare to open our hearts wider to God and to each other and to bless the vulnerable and ask them to bless us, even if it hurts. In this way, we live out Christ's own life, who confronted suffering and violence with blessing; who even from the

cross entrusted his mother and the disciple John to each other's care in a final act of loving blessing and nurture.

This pattern of wholehearted blessing and nurture reaches its fullest expression in the Eucharist. In union with Jesus, people and priest join together to bless and thank the Father. We also ask him to send the Holy Spirit to bless the simple gifts of bread and the wine to transform them into the blessed gift of the Son's life-giving presence in whose outstretched arms all are embraced and from whose open hands all blessings flow.