

Mothering Sunday
St Peter de Beauvoir
Exodus 2.1–10; Colossians 3.12–17; Luke 2.33–35

Years ago, I visited Guatemala, in Central America, to work with a grass-roots Christian organization. Their task was to help local people to unfold the Bible in their own lives. And so, we visited some quite remote communities in the beautiful hills near Chimaltenango, which had been the backdrop for a brutal civil war that had lasted many years.

One day, I found myself taken to a Bible study up in these hills with a group of local women and we sat around together outside under a makeshift shelter, drinking tea and talking about the stories of our faith. As we sat, I found myself given the youngest member of their community to hold. Moses was just a few weeks old, the baby son of a woman who had lost many of her male relatives to the civil war. I hadn't had much to do with babies at that point, so I held him very cautiously at first, but eventually relaxed with the stillness and contentment that sleeping babies can bring to those who watch over them. In some senses, Moses was the baby of the whole community, part of a new generation of hope. For the brief time that I was there, they trusted me too with being part of their community and holding their treasure.

When life is fragile, as it had been for so many years in Guatemala, and oppression, captivity, and war are regular features of your life, then whole communities take on parts of the mothering role. For a different Moses, the Moses of the Hebrew Bible, whose story is told in Exodus, his life depended on the mothering instinct of several women in his community and even beyond. His biological mother gave birth to him and handed him over to others for his survival. The two Hebrew midwives, who lied to Pharaoh about always being that little bit too late to catch and kill the Hebrew babies, gave him life through solidarity with his mother. His sister Miriam stands watch over him in his basket in the rushes, waiting for him to be taken to safety. And Pharaoh's daughter is a kind of motherly protector, paying for his upbringing and later giving him a place in her household.

With all of these women watching over him, Moses grows up knowing who he is, ready to stand up against the oppression of his people. It's ironic, isn't it, that whilst Pharaoh completely overlooks the baby girls who are born, concentrating on killing the boys who threaten his rule, it's actually the women whose bravery brings about his downfall.

Let's turn for a moment to another woman who releases her son into God's care, to be a part of his plan of salvation. Luke's gospel tells of the moment when Mary and Joseph bring their son to the temple, as was the custom, for thanksgiving and purification after his birth. They are greeted and blessed by Simeon, the prophet, and Anna, the widow, but Mary is warned that this child's message of hope and liberation will be opposed by many.

Conflict and power games are always with us, tugging at the heart strings of mothers who watch and wait as their sons strive for peace in all places of conflict, whether in the Israel of the Bible, or in war zones today. I imagine that most of the mothers who attend the Happy Baby Community at St Peter's understand those feelings, having themselves fled from violence or trafficking in countries where they and their little ones cannot be safe.

The Scriptures don't give us an exact historical record of what took place around the time of Moses – or even around the life and death of Jesus. But they do tell, in a different way, the story of being in exile and of being in captivity, and of understanding how God is with us through those experiences. As the Guatemalan women I spent time with reflected on their own awful times of suffering and loss, what kept coming through was their sense of the presence of God. When they read the story of Moses and the women who saved and raised him, they were reading their own story, of staying together in faith, with each other and with God. When we read the story of Jesus, we are reading our own story – seeing how Jesus, shamed and misunderstood, is put to death to free us from the sin which holds us prisoner. Whether or not we are mothers, we feel the pain of Mary in giving up what's most precious to her in order to bring to birth the redemption of the world. This is our story. This is our song. This is the word of God which dwells richly in us.

I wonder who it was who nurtured your calling, who gave you a place within the story of faith, and who brought alive your relationship with God? Moses had his faith brought to life by the women who protected and raised him. Jesus was welcomed by and raised in the community of the temple, where he used to hang out even while his parents searched high and low for him. Baby Moses in Guatemala would, I am sure, have been brought up in faith by the many women of his exiled community who told him that the stories of the Bible were his story too.

The letter to the Colossians gives us this metaphor of the Word *dwelling* within us. Dwelling is about being nurtured, fostered, tended, given a home, being at home – all words which have some connection with the mothering stories which we've opened up together today. We need to help the Word to dwell within our family. In fact, bringing to birth and nurturing the faith of a community's children is the responsibility of every adult in this household of faith.

One of the challenges for St Peter's, as you look forward to the future and as you discern the qualities that you hope to see in a new incumbent, will be to think about how you pass on your faith to new generations. You are amazing as a church at being, at least in non-Covid times, an oasis of calm in the middle of this community. You also have a long and proud history of social engagement, serving those who are most vulnerable, including those who have been displaced as refugees. Welcome, hospitality, respect, and kindness are at the heart of what you do. But it strikes me that there is still more to think about, for all of us, in the area of making new disciples – being clear and joyful in describing the faith in Jesus Christ that is in all of our hearts and showing the ways of discipleship to young people and to all those who have not been brought up with the foundations of faith. The world has changed hugely over the past fifty or so years. We can't assume that people are brought up with a Christian faith or are encouraged to develop one through most experiences of school. We can't assume that they will just wander and find their way into St Peter's beautiful, calm building, and kneel to have a conversation with God. There is a baton that needs to be passed on – and that baton is the baton of faith in God through Jesus Christ.

So my challenge to you on this Mothering Sunday is first to reflect on how Christ is at the heart of your own stories. Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you. And the second part is to ask yourself what part you will play in the mothering task that we all share, men and women, young and old, which is to nurture others in faith so that they too can see the word of Christ dwelling in their lives. What can you do together as a church to grow new disciples, sharing and tending that Word in your church community?

Yes, serve people without any strings and without any ulterior motives, but also serve them by helping them to grow in them the faith which will bring them fulness of life. Live, knowing that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is among you. Teach those you encounter, those you love, the stories of God, so that they will know that Christ is with them too.

There are lots of different ways to approach this – Andy Rider, our Stepney Area Dean of Mission, is going to come and reflect with you during your vacancy about mission and church growth, and I am sure together you can discern some next steps that you will want to take as we – I hope – come out of the pandemic and work out how to engage in this really different landscape. But it's clear to me both that growing new disciples is at the heart of who God is calling us to be as a church, and that, without doing that, we will neither thrive as a living, believing church nor pass on our faith to generations to come – little Moses, the babies at the Happy Baby Community, or the children and grandchildren of St Peter's community.

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly . . . and whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Amen.

Exodus 2.1-10

2Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. 3When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. 4His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. 6When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. 'This must be one of the Hebrews' children,' she said. 7Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' 8Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Yes.' So the girl went and called the child's mother. 9Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed it. 10When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, * 'because', she said, 'I drew him out* of the water.'

Colossians 3.12–17

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord* has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16Let the word of Christ* dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.* 17And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Luke 2.33–35

33 And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34Then Simeon* blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'