

**AFC 402**

**10<sup>th</sup> March 2024**

**Exodus 2.1-10** p.45

**John 3.14-21** p.80

## **A place called Home**

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Today, thousands of cards will have been sent, flowers given and Spa dates promised, and that is all to the good. Whether we call it Mothering Sunday or Mothers' Day, this fourth Sunday in Lent can be a positive celebration of love.

For Mothering Sunday has two ancient traditions, one based on church and the other on home. I suspect the church one is rarely practised today and that is the idea of returning to your Mother church on the fourth Sunday of Lent, whether that's the cathedral church of the diocese or the church in which you were baptised and grew up. Maybe the other tradition does have a modern equivalent. In its old form it meant servants were given the day off to travel back to their village and see their mothers and families for the day. Well, I suspect a lot of mums might be being taken out for lunch today or will have a visit or a call from family.

Home can mean many different things and be experienced in vastly different ways. As Heather reminded us at the start of our Lenten journey, we are constantly *leaving home* as our situations evolve. Life simply never stands still. And so today parents of young children receiving that illegible card their toddler made at play group will only have to blink before their child becomes a teenager, another blink and maybe their own mother might have passed away, another blink and they are now a grandparent. So, a day such as this, because it brings back all such memories and a

thousand more will be tinged with both joy and sadness.

Three thoughts, then, about home this morning.

Now wouldn't we want to say that home, at its best, is a place of generous and inclusive love.

In a way a church can be a sort of family, indeed we sometimes even call it our *Spiritual Home*. I had cause to think of the church in which I grew up the other day when I received an email telling me that my old minister had passed away, the one who fifty years ago this November baptised me when I was 13.

As I was growing up in that church I remember those Sunday School afternoons when we would learn bible verses off by heart and John 3.16 was always a favourite with our teacher putting enormous emphasis on the words SO and WHOSOEVER. Her way, I think, of wanting to impart to us the idea that God's love was and is SO abundant. A generous love that can be experienced by WHOSOEVER. And, over fifty years on, I still think the verse comes alive when read that way.

In our day and age tribalism is alive and kicking. Society can, at times, seem fractured by our tendency to view others as either for or against us. Social media often talks of *cancelling* a person for no other reason than that they're just not one of us.

I suspect it was the same in John's time, maybe even more so with strong boundary lines drawn between Romans and non-Romans, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, men and women.

Into such a segregated world John declares God's love to be

abundantly inclusive. God loved the world so much, that whosoever believes in him will have life. In other words, faith and belief isn't the privilege of the few who might view themselves as spiritually superior, ALL of us can have a belief and a faith that brings a positive difference to both us and the world around us.

I think we long for homes, whether of four walls or the home town or home country where we live, to be places with such a constructive understanding of love. A place where people experience dignity, a sense of welcome and worth, and a belief in them from their peers. An inclusive and abundant love offered by us that reflects God's love offered to us. Home, as a Place of Love.

Secondly this morning we all have both a need and a longing for home to be a Place of Security.

Perhaps Jesus had two homes. Of course, there was Nazareth and those thirty years spent with parents and siblings. Silent years, hardly mentioned in the gospel story. But these years filled the majority of the life of Jesus – he lived them ten times longer than his brief three years of public ministry.

And then there was that other home of Bethany. Maybe no blood ties there, just the deep and supportive friendship of Mary, Martha and Lazareth.

Neither home was perfect, yet we sense both were valued for the love and security given – however much it faltered from time to time.

This year, on Mothering Sunday, as we celebrate all the security that has been ours whenever a house becomes a home, I'm very conscious that just over 2,000 miles away in Gaza tens of

thousands have lost that security.

I came across this account from *Embrace the Middle East*, which will be one of our Mission Offering charities later this year about Maria. She works for the Caritas organisation as a social worker. Just after 7<sup>th</sup> October her home by the coast was shelled and destroyed, so she took her elderly father, with whom she lives, in his wheelchair to lodge with friends. Then came the order for them all to evacuate that part of Gaza so she went, with her dad, to the Christian Orthodox Cultural Centre and stayed there with 500 other internally displaced persons. On 31<sup>st</sup> October the centre was destroyed, so she moved to the Gaza YMCA. Less than two months later, just before Christmas the YMCA was shelled and raised to the ground, so Maria and her elderly, frightened father now live in one of the abandoned and unsafe houses in town, unsure and terrified of what will happen next. In three months, she and her father have been displaced four times. They have, quite simply lost any sense of security that home can offer.

Home is so precious. Routine and stability so comforting. On such a day as this, even as we count our blessings, we remember those who do not share them and we long and pray for peace.

Home, a Place of Love and a Place of Security.

Now I've gone *off-piste* with today's other reading, substituting the one set with this account of the early days of Moses.

Because the last thing I want to say about home is to rejoice when it becomes a Place of Inspiration – and on a day such as this, inspiration especially from the women who bless our lives.

To that end I've taken note of a chapter of a book we've recently read at AFC, written by the former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, entitled *Lessons in Leadership*. It's a chapter, based on the story we heard earlier, in which he identifies all the women who, in the process of enabling Moses, showed great belief, faith and leadership themselves. These women are exemplars of the *whosoever* of which John was to write centuries later.

So, looking at the unfolding narrative of the life of Moses. Rabbi Sacks points to Yokherved, his mother. At a time when the Egyptians feared a population increase of the Jews they had enslaved, instructing the midwives to kill every Jewish boy at birth, Yokherved had the courage to bear three children: Miriam, Moses and Aaron. Such was her strength of character and influence for good that the Chief Rabbi comments *Not by accident did her children all become leaders*.

One of those children, Miriam, the older sister of Moses, enabled her brother to live ensuring that he was rescued from the bullrushes of the Nile. Miriam also had the courage to argue with her father, Amram, when he suggested his fellow countrymen divorce all their wives and thus stop producing any children at all. A plan he later withdrew having been persuaded by his savvy daughter Miriam.

Dr Sacks says it doesn't end there because there's also those wonderful midwives of the previous chapter, Shifra and Puah. Instead of killing the baby boys they concoct a story to convince those who are planning genocide that the Jewish women were so strong that the babies all arrived before they did and so no killing took place. These midwives knew there are moral limits to power and that not all instructions should be obeyed if they are evil. They are early examples of passive resistance upon which later leaders such as Ghandi and Luther King would build.

Jonathan Sacks writes of these women in this chapter of the book we studied together: *They were all leaders because they had courage and conscience. They refused to be intimidated by power or defeated by circumstance. They were the real heroes of the Exodus. Their courage is still a source of inspiration today.* Today we give thanks for all who have, and continue, to inspire us.

Well, I must close with a last thought on John 3.16, from today's gospel reading.

I'd have loved to have been in the congregation of Marylebone Parish church on the first Thursday of Lent 1887 to hear Stainer's oratorio, *The Crucifixion*, sung for the very first time. Stainer's friend, Sparrow Simpson had selected texts from the King James' Bible. Stainer then put these to music. The kind of music, he said he hoped, would be singable by every church choir in the country. Indeed, his *Crucifixion* has been sung at Marylebone every year since, and I see on their website the next occasion will be Good Friday this year.

One of the best loved pieces from *Crucifixion*, is sung by the whole choir with words from John 3.16. It's become a piece in its own right and is often referred to simply as Stainer's: *For God so loved the world.* And in the language of the King James' version goes: *For God so loved the world, that whosoever believeth in him will not perish but have everlasting life.*

God's love made manifest in the places we call home, a place of love, a place of security and a place of inspiration. Thanks be to God and the way she fills our lives with love every day. Amen.