

# Mothering Sunday 2021 (Year B)

At first sight, the readings we have heard today seem to bear little relationship to the keeping of Mothering Sunday. Yet, in fact, it is perhaps a good time during this season of pandemic to renew our understanding of this day which has become rather overladen with the rather cloying sentimentality which has become the norm over recent decades largely through the efforts of firms like Hallmark to sell us their cards! The celebrating of Mothering Sunday itself is ancient and was originally more to do with the Church as mother to Christians rather than a celebration of our actual mothers and there was a tradition of people returning to either the church of their baptism or to their local cathedral. In the Middle Ages, Hugh Grosseeste, Bishop of Lincoln, had to issue a letter to his clergy ordering that they *'should strictly prohibit one parish from fighting with another over whose banners should come first in processions at the time of the annual visitation and veneration of the mother church.'* Well, chance would be a fine thing at the moment! However, in terms of our passage through Lent, this mid-point is marked by a bit of a breather and refreshment.

The one thing which survives of this celebration from early times and which I think helps us with the widest interpretation is the Introit to the Roman Catholic Mass used on this day. The opening word gives its name to the *other* name for today – Laetare Sunday – Rejoice Sunday. The introit uses words from the Prophet Isaiah: *Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her 'that you may drink deeply with delight from her consoling breast. For thus says our God, 'You shall be nursed and carried on her arm. As a mother comforts her children, so I will comfort you.'* (Isaiah 66: 10-11)

This language may make some feel queasy in this sanitised age, yet actually takes us to the heart of relationship in the earthiest way with the powerful imagery of intimate and life-giving sustenance. Above all, whatever your take on Mothering Sunday, relationship is truly at its heart.

What are we to make of the way in which the curious story of Moses raising a bronze serpent in the wilderness becomes the inspiration for the Gospel reading we heard? The Children of Israel have already been in trouble for creating a golden calf, yet here the person who has smashed the first tablets of stone when discovering this idolatry, himself raises a serpent so that whoever gazes on it will be delivered from the *fiery* or *seraph* snakes bringing death to the people. In fact, what I think we understand is that this bronze serpent is in fact a 'sign' rather than an idol. It is merely a focus through which the people look beyond to the God whom they cannot see, who ultimately heals them. Later in its history this particular bronze does indeed become an idol of worship at the Temple until King Hezekiah has it destroyed because the power to know life is not found in mere metal but in relationship – exactly because looking beyond this image is the very thing which matters.

So what of its relation to our Gospel reading? This is part of the interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus, a pharisee, whom John depicts as visiting the Lord at night. This is not merely an observation. It has a bearing on understanding the passage of faith. Nicodemus is on a journey through which he will deepen his understanding and relationship with Jesus.

In linking the story of the bronze serpent with the imagery of Son of Man being lifted up, John is leading us to the Crucifixion, which he wants us to understand as a moment of strange glory, because it is the flip side of the raising up of Jesus through resurrection. Note that he talks of the inevitability of this moment. The Son of Man *must* be lifted up because through it we are led to knowing the fulness of relationship God desires with us: *'so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believes in him may have eternal life.'*

Please don't limit this to our further journey into the heart of God when we pass from this life - the promise Jesus makes to us - wondrous and true as it is. It is even more glorious because we are called to recognise that we experience the resurrection life of Jesus here-and-now and are called to be signs of this to all we meet; signs of the journey to eternal glory in the heart of God's love. Jesus speaks further on this when he talks of darkness and light. We are called to be Children of Light – again, relationship to the Creator of all.

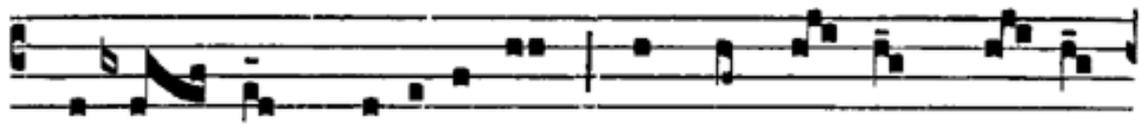
What I think we can also see in this passage is the freedom to all in terms of life. It is the same with relationships. Without taking sides, we have seen this week that even in the most famous family of our nation it is apparent how relationship is something which requires constant work; listening, engaging, seeking to deepen love. Alas, sometimes this can go disastrously wrong. In faith terms, one side of the relationship is completely unbreakable. God will never close the door in desiring an ever-deepening relationship with each one of us. It is our call.

The more I have thought about the story of the Israelites' journey to freedom this week, the more I recognise the parallels with our own time – here and now in 2021. As they endured the fiery serpents, so we live in a time of pandemic. As they found it difficult to turn from idols, so many people are caught up today 'worshipping' idols of their own erecting. Ultimately, the Children of Israel look upon the bronze serpent yet look beyond to the God who saves - their fears allayed.

So too for us. We are called to raise our eyes on the one who is raised for us; called to remember the cross and resurrection as the focus for life itself, because Jesus is the end point in the journey of faith. We are called to know that in him and through him all relationships find their fullest expression. Through death and resurrection, the depth of God's love for each one of us is made known, and the immeasurable riches of God's grace in kindness shown towards us in Christ Jesus.

So on this Mothering Sunday let us give thanks for the gift of maternal love, and also rejoice in the wonder of our own relationship with God – a relationship open to all through Jesus Christ.

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L Aetá- re \* Jerúsa-lem : et convén-tum fá- ci-  
te ómnes qui di- lí-gi- tis é- am : gau-

### Numbers 21: 4-9

From Mount Hor the Children of Israel set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.' Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

### Ephesians 2: 1-10

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

### John 3: 14-21

Jesus said, 'Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'