

A service for 19th March, 2023 – Mothering Sunday (StF)

Call to Worship: Luke chapter 2 verses 34 and 35

Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother:

“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Amen.

We are here to worship God, to celebrate motherhood and remember the Church is like a good mother who helps us to grow in faith and love. Our opening hymn is Bishop Timothy Dudley Smith’s version of the Magnificat, inspired by the 1961 “New English Bible”. Number 186, ‘Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!’

1. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!

Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;

Tender to me the promise of his word;

In God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

2. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!

Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;

His mercy sure, from age to age the same;

His holy name – the Lord, the Mighty One.

3. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!

Powers and dominions lay their glory by;

Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,

The hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

4. Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!

Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord

To children’s children and for evermore!

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Let us pray.

Almighty, Sovereign God, Maker of all life throughout the universe, we have come to worship and adore you as we celebrate your wisdom, power, faithfulness, goodness, grace and holiness. Lord, whose might is as boundless as your love, we are here to sing your praises, to pray in faith and to receive and to respond to your word. You are the one true God who from the beginning has performed mighty deeds and upheld a covenant with human beings who have answered your call.

As we journey through Lent, we remember in humble gratitude that you shared our mortal form as Christ Jesus, who has taught us with words and deeds of authority the love that builds us up, not the knowledge that makes us conceited and selfish. Jesus is indeed the pattern for how you want us to live and when he became the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world and was raised from death, he broke the power of sin and death and offers us everlasting life as a gift of grace, not as something we deserve or earn by our works. Therefore, with joyful hearts, we offer you thanks for your everlasting grace. All glory, honour power and praise be yours now and evermore. Amen.

In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, ‘Lord, in your mercy,’ please respond with ‘Hear our prayer’.

Thank you, Lord, for our lives, for our fellowship here, for everything that has brought us pleasure, for people who have brought light and joy into our lives, as well as experiences and challenges that have given meaning to our lives and forged our character. Thank

you for this beautiful planet on which we live and help us to treat it better, so future generations may inherit a healthy world.

Lord, in your mercy..... **Hear our prayer.**

Merciful God, we know we don't deserve such blessings, for we often fall short of what we know we ought to be and what you want us to be. In sadness we confess that we do not always love and serve you with all our heart; we don't always care for other people as we would like to be cared for. Help us turn away from our sinful ways and forgive us in Jesus' holy name.

Lord, in your mercy..... **Hear our prayer.**

God most merciful and holy, you hear and answer our prayers. We believe that you have pardoned us and call us to follow you once more. Grant us the power of your Holy Spirit so we may love and serve both you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

We shall say the prayer that Jesus taught us.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

We shall sing a hymn I wrote twenty years ago, but modified ten days ago, 'For Motherhood we thank you, Lord:'

1. For motherhood we thank you, Lord:

**For lifelong love which mothers give;
For care and balm so freely poured
Which build us up and help us thrive.**

2. Poor Hannah wept in her distress

**And at the Tabernacle prayed;
So when God cured her barrenness –
She kept the promise she had made.**

3. When Mary heard the angel speak

**Of how she'd bear God's own dear Son,
She praised the Lord, who'd raised the meek
And said, "Now let God's will be done."**

4. Our Mother Church calls us to serve,

**Although the world may scorn, reprove:
Take up your cross and keep your nerve,
For hate is overcome by love.**

5. Like Hannah, may we all be blessed;

**Like Mary, seek to do God's will.
Lord, grant us faith to serve you best
And in Christ's name your call fulfil.**

M. Rider (23rd March, 2003. To "Williams" HP 363, or "Herongate" (StF 415)) Modified 9th March, 2023)

We come now to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.

Almighty God, you have given us a beautiful, self-sustaining planet upon which to live, yet we are aware of its brokenness, through natural disasters and, more often because of human, pride, foolishness and greed. Like Mary, the mother of Christ, we offer ourselves to play what part we can to help those around us who are in need, distress, or

any kind of trouble. However, our powers are limited, whereas yours are infinite. Therefore, we turn to you, our gracious heavenly Father, in our prayer for the world.

Today, we bring our prayers for mothers everywhere, especially for the care and nurturing they offer. Accept our thanks for mothers, for step-mothers, for men who have adopted that role through choice or necessity. Grant them your blessing. We pray for women who find motherhood a burden, or who struggle to raise their children successfully, for women who would have loved to be mothers but couldn't have children and for parents who have suffered the loss of small children. Lord, comfort and uphold them in their distress.

Lord, we pray for the peace of the world. Bring to an end the warring madness that causes so much death and destruction in so many countries, making widows, orphans and refugees, breaking bodies, minds and spirits. Gracious God, breathe the Spirit of truth and love upon this troubled world and help us to live in harmony with our neighbours. We pray particularly for the war in Ukraine to end and for the restoration of peace between Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem.

Generous God, we pray for men and women the world over: that they may enjoy justice and freedom. Grant all peoples a longing for fairness, a willingness to work together in trust, to seek the common good and to share justly the earth's resources, so all nations can live in security.

Jesus came to heal and comfort, so we pray for everybody we know who is sick in body, mind or spirit, including those who are recovering from injuries and operations, as well as anybody who is facing an operation in the near future. We pray for their healing, renewed strength and comfort not only through the professional care and support they receive, but from your holy presence in their time of need. In your compassion, reach out to all who are living with a dementia as well as their carers. Grant them the support and encouragement needed to help them cope and assure them of your loving presence amid their loss and grief.

We also pray for people around us who feel lonely, or neglected, or who are unemployed and homeless, particularly at this time of year. Remember, too, those who have lost loved-ones and who find bereavement unbearable. In a time of silence we offer you names of people for whom we are most concerned

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Lord, help us to be sensitive to the needs of people around us who are in any kind of need, or trouble, so we can befriend and offer them practical support. We pray that you will enfold all of them in the warmth of your love, so they may receive healing, comfort, courage, hope and peace.

Compassionate God, we pray for the leaders of wealthy nations to be generous in offering aid to countries where there is great poverty and suffering, in particular lands such as Afghanistan and lands in the Horn of Africa which are afflicted by droughts and famine and countries that have suffered natural disasters, such as the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. We ask a special blessing upon work being done by charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid to provide victims with desperately-needed aid.

We pray, too, for people in this country for whom life is a struggle with some people who are facing the awful choice between heating their homes, or of eating properly during this winter. Bless food banks, warm spaces and other initiatives like holiday clubs which are helping the children of low-paid families, but may new ways be found to offer hope and support people this winter and beyond.

We ask your blessing on this church, the churches in our area and indeed on the World Church. As we travel towards Easter, renew and unite us in spirit, truth and love so our words and deeds proclaim Good News to a sin-darkened world.

Abba, Father God, bless us, our friends and families. Keep us free from harm and grant us strength to resist temptation to sin. May the Holy Spirit help us share the love you give us in such abundance with all-comers, so we honour you in the sacred name of Christ our Saviour. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Fred Kaan, a Dutchman who was appointed Moderator of the West Midlands Province of the United Reform Church in 1978. He occasionally worshipped at St. Phillip's Cathedral, Birmingham. Hymn number 119, 'God of Eve and God of Mary'.

**1. God of Eve and God of Mary,
God of love and mother-earth,
Thank you for the ones who with us
Shared their life and gave us birth.**

**2. As you came to earth in Jesus,
So you come to us today;
You are present in the caring
That prepares us for life's way.**

**3. Thank you that the Church, our Mother,
Gives us bread and fills our cup,
And the comfort of the Spirit
Warms our hearts and lifts us up.**

**4. Thank you for belonging, shelter,
Bonds of friendship, ties of blood,
And for those who have no children,
Yet are parents under God.**

**5. God of Eve and God of Mary,
Christ our brother, human Son,
Spirit, caring like a Mother,
Take our love and make us one!**

© Fred Kaan (1929 – 2009)

Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 7 and 22 to 35

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons". Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy

Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother:

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." Amen.

Address:

When God sent Jesus to serve all people and to be our Saviour, he chose a young woman, Mary, who wasn't married when she was informed that she'd bear God's Son. In spite of certain scandal and probable danger – a betrothed yet unmarried woman could be stoned to death if she was suspected of adultery – Mary obeyed God's wishes, even though the responsibility of raising any child, let alone Jesus, must have been frightening for so young a woman. The Magnificat, Mary's hymn of praise, shows her faithful response to God's call, rather than her rejection of the angel's words. Clearly, she was willing to bear any burden to serve the Lord, but when she and Joseph went to the temple in Jerusalem for the ritual purification and presentation ceremonies required for their firstborn, they encountered a devout man who had been waiting for the Messiah and who had been led to them by the Holy Spirit. The man, Simeon, said, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

For more than thirty years Mary must have suffered greatly, waiting for Simeon's prophecy to be fulfilled. On Good Friday we shall remember when her worst fears were realized, as Mary, her friends and young John stood at foot of the cross on which Jesus hung, dying in agony. It is hard enough when a child dies before his or her parent, but Mary's son was dying as a criminal in the cruelest way Romans could devise. For Jews, it was even worse, for Jesus died under the Deuteronomic curse, "**Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.**" Think for a moment: Mary's son died accursed for our sins.

Imagine Mary's feelings: her agony as she saw her beloved son die; self-criticism as she wondered whether or not she could have done anything to stop Jesus' ministry; a terrible sense of failure, as Simeon's words seemed to make her motherhood crumble to dust, for Mary, like the disciples, had no understanding of the significance of Jesus' death until after that first Easter. All she would have seen was failure at Calvary, not victory over the power of Satan.

Yet, despite his incredible personal suffering, When Jesus saw that small group beneath his cross, he only thought of his mother's welfare, so he entrusted her to John, directing him to look after her as own mother and telling Mary to take John as her son in his place. The compassion shown by Christ is breath-taking: there's no self-pity, nor doubt; Jesus put his mother in the care of the disciple he loved and trusted, showing God's love isn't sentimental but practical.

Mary showed sacrificial, maternal love, covered by the Hebrew word, '**racham**'; love that comes from the very depths of our soul, love which trusts God enough to put

itself at his disposal, come what may. However, we see even an even greater form of love from God himself – **agape** – love that is boundless, unmerited and free. God sent his Son to live among us, with neither status, nor wealth to isolate himself. Jesus came as the Perfect Sacrifice which atones for the sins of the world, but the story doesn't end there. He was raised, so we have eternal life as a gift of grace, not something we can either earn or deserve. Moreover, after his ascension, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit upon his followers and the Church – **Mother Church** was born at Pentecost. I marvel at God's amazing love!

We are challenged on Mothering Sunday to reflect upon the nature of maternal love and upon the love Mother Church was commissioned to offer all-comers. We're called to be as faithful and caring as Hannah and Mary, to trust in God and to do his will in response to his grace – even if our service causes us grief at times. Think of the pain, physical and spiritual, that Jesus bore for our sakes, yet almost with his dying breath he made provision for his mother. Any pains or trials we face in our discipleship will pale into insignificance compared with Christ's suffering for sinful humanity. May our lives and service reflect the exemplary qualities of mothers in today's readings and may our church, Mother Church, prove as steadfast as they were in witnessing to God's amazing love for all. **May each of our lives let the Good News brought by our Saviour shine out into our sin-darkened world – as beacons to draw others to know, love and follow Christ Jesus. Amen.**

Our closing hymn was written by Jan Struther, the nom de plume of Janet Anstruther. She was an acclaimed author whose best-known novel was made into the splendid wartime film, "Mrs. Miniver", starring Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon. We shall sing number 526, 'Lord of all hopefulness'.

**1. Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,
Whose trust, ever childlike, no cares could destroy,
Be there at our waking, and give us, we pray,
Your bliss in our hearts, Lord, at the break of the day.**

**2. Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith.
Whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe,
Be there at our labours, and give us, we pray,
Your strength in our hearts, Lord, at the noon of the day.**

**3. Lord of all kindness, Lord of all grace,
Your hands swift to welcome, your arms to embrace,
Be there at our homing, and give us, we pray,
Your love in our hearts, Lord, at the eve of the day.**

**4. Lord of all gentleness, Lord of all calm,
Whose voice is contentment, whose presence is balm,
Be there at our sleeping, and give us, we pray,
Your peace in our hearts, Lord, at the end of the day.**

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Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all now and forever more. Amen.