

A service for Mothering Sunday, 27th March, 2022 (StF)

Call to Worship: Isaiah Ch. 49 vs. 15 & 16

"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me."

Here we have Isaiah's vision of God whose love is even stronger than maternal love – even for the disobedient Judeans exiled in Babylon.

Lent Prayer

Loving, heavenly Father, it is so easy to abuse our authority over others, to misuse our spiritual gifts and skills and to possess more than we need, rather than helping less fortunate neighbours. Help us to resist temptation to act selfishly and cruelly. Instead, guide us by the perfect example of your dear Son, our Saviour, who gave himself generously as the atonement offering for the sins of the world. Amen.

We shall sing a hymn by Mart Haugen, a liturgical composer and musical performer from Minnesota. He is composer-in-residence at Mayflower Community Congregational Church in Minneapolis. The house in this hymn is Mother Church, a community, rather than a building. Hymn number 409, 'Let us build a house where love can dwell,'

1. Let us build a house where love can dwell

And all can safely live,

A place where saints and children tell

How hearts learn to forgive.

Built of hopes and dreams and visions,

Rock of faith and vault of grace;

Here the love of Christ shall end divisions: *Chorus*

All are welcome,

All are welcome,

All are welcome in this place.

2. Let us build a house where prophets speak,

And words are strong and true,

Where all God's children dare to seek

To dream God's reign anew.

Here the cross shall stand as witness

And of symbol of God's grace;

Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus: *Chorus*

3. Let us build a house where love is found

In water, wine and wheat:

A banquet hall on holy ground

Where peace and justice meet.

Here the love of God, through Jesus,

Is revealed in time and space;

As we share in Christ the feast that frees us: *Chorus*

4. Let us build a house where hands will reach

Beyond the wood and stone

To heal and strengthen, serve and teach,

And live the Word they've known.

**Here the outcast and the stranger
Bear the image of God's face;
Let us bring an end to fear and danger: *Chorus***

**5. Let us build a house where all are named,
Their songs and visions heard
And loved and treasured, taught and claimed
As words within the Word.**

**Built of tears and cries and laughter,
Prayers of faith and songs of grace,**

Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter: *Chorus* © Marty Haugen (born 1950)

Let us come to our Lord in prayer.

Loving God, as our Saviour, Jesus told the people of Jerusalem, 'I long to gather you safely under my wings, as a mother hen gathers her chicks', we come to thank you for loving and protecting us – gathering us to yourself.

'As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you,' says the Lord. God of the universe, Author and Sustainer of all life, hear and accept our praise and worship, for you care for each one of us, providing our daily needs and guiding us; in love you reach out to everyone to comfort and strengthen us with unnumbered blessings.

Above all else, thank you, Lord for giving your only and Beloved Son, Christ Jesus, to be our Saviour, guide and friend, for through his death and resurrection you overcame the power of sin and death and draw us close to you as a loving parent holds a child to make us feel safe and warm in your care. All glory, honour, power and praise are yours by right and we worship you in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Let us set ourselves right with our Lord by confessing our sins. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy,' please respond with 'Hear our prayer'.

Lord, on Mothering Sunday, we remember that a mother will often sacrifice her own needs for the sake of her children. Lord, for the times when our own desires have been more important to us than the needs of other people, we ask your forgiveness. Lord, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

Like a mother, you give of your very self to nourish and sustain us.

Lord, for the times we have ignored you and turned away, we ask your forgiveness.

Lord, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

Can a mother forget her own child? We are confident that you remember us always, so we are extremely sorry for the times when we have forgotten you. We recall, also, when we have failed to share your love with our neighbours, especially those in need or distress. As we repent in the lovely name of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, we trust in your grace for our pardon. Lord, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

Merciful God, you hear and answer all prayers and we believe that you have indeed forgiven us. Teach us to live as you wish us to, by following the perfect example of Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We shall say the prayer our Lord taught his disciples.

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 the hymn on our sheets, 'For motherhood we thank you, Lord:'

1. For motherhood we thank you, Lord:

For lifelong care which mothers give;

For love and blessings freely-poured

Which help us prosper as we live.

2. When Hannah prayed in her distress,

She made a pact before the Lord;

If he would end her childlessness.

She pledged her son and kept her word.

1. 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 may your will be done."

4. Our Mother Church calls us to serve,

Although the world may sneer and shove:

Take up your cross and keep your nerve;

Let hate be overcome by love.

5. Like Hannah, may we know God's grace;

Like Mary, seek to do his will:

Lord, let our faith and trust replace

Such doubts and fears that haunt us still.

M. Rider (23rd March, 2003. To "Herongate" HP804) Mod 1st March, 2010 & 121th March, 2022

We come now to our prayers of intercession. We begin with a prayer for Ukraine. Let us pray.

Lord of all nations, you made us, you love us all and understand everything about us. You declared creation 'good', yet we have been poor stewards of the world and our failure to live in peace with our neighbours is heart-breaking. At present our hearts go out to Ukraine and its peoples, as they face attacks by Russia.

In your mercy Lord, be with all Ukrainians: President Zelenskyy and his advisors, the armed forces and militia as they resist Russia's might; civilians, women, children and elderly, who have to shelter from bombardment and who are facing diminishing supplies. Grant them steadfast courage and look on them with compassion. Remember, too, Ukrainian refugees, who are fleeing to friendly countries. May they be made welcome and receive all the support they need.

We pray that a peace treaty can soon be negotiated to end the conflict, that the Kremlin's plans are frustrated and that Ukraine will remain a free, democracy after hostilities have ceased. May other nations continue to provide practical support and hospitality not only during the conflict, but as long as help is needed.

Above all, Lord, restore peace to Ukraine and help it rebuild what war has destroyed. We offer our prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.

We continue with prayers about our concerns for the world.

God of creation, although we have been blessed with this aching beautiful planet, we grieve and lament about the brokenness we see here and abroad. We want to play what part we can in making the world a better place, but we recognize that our own powers are limited and confess that, at times, many complex situations threaten to

overwhelm us. However, we are not afraid to ask you to reach out to inspire people with greater ability, power and influence than we possess; people who can heal the suffering around us, for we know that to you all things are possible. Nevertheless, Lord, give us the courage to play what part we can by campaigning against both prejudice and injustice, by doing all we can to relieve poverty, by learning to use the earth's resources more carefully and by encouraging others to do so, too.

Lord of all nations, besides praying for an end to the conflict in Ukraine, we pray for peace across the world. Guide national leaders to resolve disputes with neighbours by negotiation rather than resorting to military action. Instead, may they learn to rule with justice and mercy, for only then can true peace be established and prevail. In your mercy, hear our prayer for all victims of warfare, terrorism and persecution. Grant them the resources and encouragement they need to rebuild their lives and to be healed in body, mind and spirit.

We pray for the people of Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Yemen and Sudan where serious famines may lead to catastrophic loss of life. May the situation in Ukraine not divert the attention of governments and relief agencies from providing much-needed aid.

Gracious Lord of well-being, look with compassion on people around us who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. May they receive the professional care and support they need to be restored to health and may they experience your loving presence during their time of need.

We remember people who have lost loved-ones during the past two years, both because of COVID19 and for other reasons, but who have been unable either to mark their passing or to mourn because of restrictions at funerals. We pray for neighbours who are suffering from the physical, mental, social and economic effects of the pandemic and, not least of all, for children whose education and general wellbeing have been seriously harmed during the pandemic. Grant them the support, comfort and courage to recover.

In a time of silence, we bring to mind people around us who are in special need of your care and, as we name them before you, we are confident you will know their needs and will reach out to them in loving-kindness:

..... Lord, wherever possible, help us to offer them practical support and friendship and we ask you to embrace everybody for whom we pray with the warmth of your love, offering them healing, courage, comfort and lasting peace.

Holy God, we pray for Mother Church, not only churches in our district, but the World Church as we emerge from the dark shadow of coronavirus. Help us learn new, effective ways of meeting the needs of our communities and to reflect the goodness and grace of Jesus by serving him with united, faithful hearts.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care and help us to share the abundance of your love with our neighbours in the same ways as a mother may nurture and bless her family, so our lives bring you honour through Christ Jesus our Lord and friend. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 2 verses 22 to 35

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.

Our penultimate hymn is by the well-known writer, Alan Gaunt. Not so well-known is that he was Headmaster at King Edward's in Birmingham, then at Rugby School, at Malvern College and at Winchester College. I am amazed that such a busy man found time to write any hymns! Let us sing hymn number 120, 'We gladly celebrate and praise,'

**1. We gladly celebrate and praise,
The gift so great and good,
Through which God's kindness is made known:
The gift of motherhood.**

**2. We sing of Mary's mother-love:
For she, of all on earth,
Received the privilege to bear
And bring God's Son to birth.**

**3. We pray that God's own mother-love
Will hold in gentleness,
All children who have never known
A mother's tenderness.**

**4. For mothers, who with broken hearts,
Are faced with grief and loss,
We pray the Son of God will give
Deep comfort from his cross.**

**5. We trust the mother-love of God,
Who bears, in Mary's boy,
Our pain and sorrow, to secure
Our everlasting joy.**

© Alan Gaunt (born 1935)

Sermon: "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord". Luke 2:23
As somebody brought up in the Anglican tradition, but now a firmly-rooted non-conformist, I found the strong opposition to extending women's roles in the priesthood a source of despair rather than anger. After all, women ministers have served many non-conformist denominations for several decades, with great success and I might still have not become a local preacher were it not for two deaconesses, one of whom challenged me about my call, the other who took me through my training – a hard task indeed!

Therefore, on Mothering Sunday, I think it is appropriate to consider the qualities of Mary, mother of Jesus.

Let us consider God's choice of Mary as mother of his Son. We know that Mary was related to Elizabeth, wife of the priest, Zechariah and mother of John the Baptist, that Elizabeth was descended from a priestly family, so it is reasonable to surmise that Mary, too, came from a Levite background. She was living in Nazareth when the angel Gabriel gave her news that she would bear God's Son. Gabriel's message raised serious issues for Mary, as her pregnancy might have led to charges of infidelity levelled against her, especially if Joseph denied that he was the father. At the least, Mary would have borne public disgrace for bearing a child outside marriage and, had Joseph rejected her, she would have become an outcast.

What is remarkable about our reading is Mary's acceptance of God's commission. Many young women would have been less than enthusiastic about such a case, but not Mary. In amazement she asked how she could give birth whilst still a maiden. Mary did not doubt the angel, but instead was filled with wonder and intrigued how the Lord would fulfil his message and she accepted Gabriel's explanation, which ended with the declaration that **'nothing is impossible with God'**. She displayed an amazing trust in God and made herself wholly available to his will and simply replied, **'I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.'** In other words, she was prepared to take on the world, its finger-pointing, spiteful condemnation, disgrace and ostracism to do God's will. Mary wasn't naïve nor foolish. She knew the cost of obedience and was willing to pay it for the Lord's sake – for the redemption of Israel. It is hardly surprising that her Son, Jesus, was obedient, even to death on a cross, trusting only in God's saving grace after being raised by such a mother.

We know that Mary had a good grasp of the Scriptures, for the **Magnificat**, her hymn of praise, develops the song of **Hannah after she conceived Samuel**, from Hannah's words of triumph over her enemies to Mary's praise for the goodness and grace of God towards the downtrodden and poor. In **"His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation"**, the word, **'chesed'** which our text gives as **'mercy'** can also be translated as **'loving-kindness'** and Jesus came to offer loving-kindness especially to the despised and marginalised in society.

The Magnificat, Mary's hymn of praise for God's gift, Jesus – **Jehushua** – God saves – shows her faithful response to God's call, but a week after Jesus' birth, a shadow was cast over her joy, for when she and Joseph went for the ritual purification and presentation ceremonies, the faithful, elderly Simeon, told her: **"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."** There is no evidence that Simeon was a priest, only that he was a devout man who had been promised he would not die until he had seen the Messiah, God's anointed. However, the Holy Spirit guided him to Mary and the infant Jesus and gave voice to his disturbing prophecy.

Imagine the anxiety Mary bore for three decades, as she raised her son, not only attending to his material needs, but nourishing him spiritually – helping him grow into the man God wanted: faithful, obedient, courageous and open-minded – willing to break the mould of orthodoxy. She must have known that, despite all she was doing, her beloved son was destined to suffer in a way that would hurt her to the uttermost, if only because of the opposition he faced from Pharisees and Scribes. We cannot fully empathize with Mary at the foot of the cross, as she stood watching Jesus dying, but Simeon's description of a sword piercing her soul is apt.

As she watched her son die, Mary must have wondered whether or not she could have done anything to sway Jesus from his ministry; a terrible sense of failure, as Simeon's words seemed to be crumbling to dust, for Mary, like the disciples, had no understanding of the significance of Jesus' death until the first Easter. As she stood beneath the cross, she must have wondered about God's promise and might have been anxious for the future of herself and her other children. Yet, when Jesus saw his mother and the small group below his cross, despite his incredible personal suffering, his only thought was for Mary's welfare, so he entrusted her to John, directing him to look after her as his own mother and telling Mary to take John as her son in his place. Christ's compassion is breath-taking: there is no self-pity, nor doubt; Jesus put his mother in the care of a disciple he loved and trusted, showing that God's love is not sentimental but practical.

Mary showed sacrificial, maternal love, '**racham**' in Hebrew, love which trusts God enough to put itself at his disposal, but we see an even greater form of that love from God himself – **agape** – boundless, unmerited and free. God sent his Son to live among sinners like us, with neither status, nor wealth to isolate himself from the trials of life. Jesus came as the one Perfect Sacrifice who atones for all sins and who was raised, so eternal life is ours as a gift of grace, not something we can either earn or deserve. After his ascension, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit upon his followers and the church – **Mother Church** – was born. The Church, our church, is commanded not only to proclaim good news to the world, but to live out our faith as a good mother. We must offer practical, listening care to all-comers, to defend their rights, to nurture them not only in material terms, but spiritually, too. We are called to support and encourage our neighbours in good times and bad: to laugh with them and to weep with them. And, as Mary taught the Scriptures to Jesus, we are to teach our neighbours about the grace of God we can see through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, not just by preaching to them, but by how we live.

Our challenge is to trust in God and to do his will in response for the love that flows from him – even if our service causes us grief at times. Think of the pain, both physical and spiritual, that Jesus bore for our sakes, yet almost with his dying breath he made provision for his own mother. **May our lives and service reflect the exemplary qualities of both Jesus and Mary, so we play our part to ensure our church is as steadfast as Mary in witnessing to God's amazing love for everyone. Amen.**

Although I am a frequent critic of the many shortcomings of "Singing the Faith", the hymnal has a number of first-rate newer hymns – many set to traditional, tried-and-tested melodies. Our closing hymn by the late Fred Kaan, is a fine example of what I mean. We shall sing 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)*

Benediction

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