

Adapted from a service intended for Beckminster Methodist Church
Mothering Sunday 6 p.m. 22nd March, 2020 by Martin Rider

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.

Prayers of adoration, confession and thanksgiving:

Amazing, loving God, it is good to offer our adoration and praise to you, the Creator and Sustainer of all life throughout the universe. In your might and wisdom, you not only created the vast galaxies of stars throughout the Universe, but gave us stewardship of this beautiful world with its remarkable varieties of life and, from our beginning, have sought to draw us close you as your earthly children.

Lord, as we travel through Lent, we remember with amazement and humility that you love us so much you shared our mortal body in our Lord Jesus, who lived among ordinary people like us, so he could reveal your true nature in his words and actions. More than that, Jesus become the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, breaking Satan's power in at Calvary. When he was raised from the tomb on the third day, Jesus triumphed over death, opened the gates of heaven and offers us everlasting life through faith in him. Loving Lord, we pray that you will accept the best we can offer in our worship and in our lives, for we want to be your holy people, a light to all who do not know and love Christ Jesus.

Loving Lord, we offer our thanks to you for all the many blessings we have received from you, for the good things we enjoy, for experiences and opportunities that make us glad and for challenges that test us and help form our characters. We know your blessings are undeserved, unmerited and freely-given, so may our response to your loving-kindness be to share your love with everybody we meet.

Merciful Lord, forgive us for times when we have failed to live as you call us to, for we do not always love and serve you wholeheartedly and we don't always love our neighbours as ourselves. Warm our hearts, help us change our ways and forgive us when our words and actions have caused distress and pain to our neighbours, for times when we have been unforgiving and unlovable. Pardon us for times when we turn away from people who are needy or in distress.

Lord, we believe that as you hear and answer our prayers, you already offer us a fresh start and invite us to follow you again. May we do so in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that by loving and serving our neighbours with faithful. Joyful hearts, we may honour you in Jesus' lovely name. Amen.

The Old Testament reading is 1 Samuel chapter 1 verses 21 to 28

Three thousand years ago, an Israelite, Elkanah, had two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. However, whilst Peninnah had several children, Hannah was unable to conceive. It wasn't only being childless that upset Hannah, but how Peninnah tormented her about it, for Peninnah knew that Elkanah loved Hannah more than her and jealousy increased her spite.

Nowadays, being unable to have a child still causes great heartache, especially among women who have postponed having a family in favour of advancement in their career. However, three thousand years ago, childless women were thought of as cursed, or a disgrace to their husband, so like Hannah, they were often mocked by other women. Now, you should remember that Jews usually sway when they are praying and, in her distress, poor Hannah prayed so passionately for the Lord to remove her distress at the temple at Shiloh that its priest, Eli, thought she was drunk and told her off, until she assured him she was troubled in spirit, not by spirits! When Hannah explained why she was so sad, he added his prayer to hers as she left.

Imagine her joy when she conceived soon afterwards and gave birth to healthy baby boy, whom she named Samuel. Samuel means, 'The Lord answered my prayer'. You'd have expected Hannah to keep Samuel close, to be cherished, if not spoilt, for she would be unlikely to have had another child. Instead, she recognised that Samuel was God's gift to her, so she offered him back as soon as boy was old enough to be independent of her. She took him to Eli at Shiloh and dedicated him to the Lord for all of his life. (Samuel was therefore a Nazarite – dedicated to the Lord by a sacred promise).

The first book of Samuel records how faithfully Samuel honoured his mother's promise and became vital figure in Jewish history, a blessing to the nation, by devoting the sacrificial love and faith he'd learned in infancy from Hannah to them. Amen.

'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. Poor Hannah prayed in her distress
And in the Tabernacle wept;
When God removed her barrenness -
She with her child her promise kept.**

**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 may God's 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,
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 our call fulfil.**

***M. Rider (23rd March,2003. To "Williams" HP 363, or "Herongate" HP804)
Modified 1st March, 2010)***

Prayers of intercession.

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 Hannah and 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 mothers everywhere, especially to 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. 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.

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.

Loving Lord, reach out to comfort us in our distress as the world is stricken by COVID 19. Hear our prayer for the deliverance of victims of the virus and help us to bear our fears and anxiety, knowing that you are walking with us. Remember with compassion the medical staff who are treating victims of Coronavirus, keeping them safe and focussed on their task. Inspire scientists as they seek ways of protecting us from infection and guide national leaders and their advisors to devise effective policies to stop the virus from spreading widely until it can be cured.

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.

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

Approximately one thousand years after Hannah bore Samuel, God sent Jesus to serve all people and to be our Saviour. God 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 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 she, her friends and young John stood at foot of the cross on which Jesus hung. It is hard enough when a child dies before his or her parent, but Mary's son was dying as a criminal in the cruellest way Romans could devise. For Jew, it was even worse, for Jesus died under the Deuteronomic curse, **"Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse."** Mary's son died accursed for us.

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 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.

Both Hannah and Mary showed sacrificial, maternal love, covered by the Hebrew word, '**racham**'; love that comes from the very depths of our soul 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 for 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 flawed 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.**