

A service for Mothering Sunday 10th March, 2024 (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”, probably the least poetic but most learned version. 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, Creator 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 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 confession, when I say, ‘Lord, in your mercy’, please respond with, ‘hear our prayer’.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the good things we receive from you: our lives, our work and rest, for people who have guided us, inspired us and cared for us; for experiences

and challenges that have brought us pleasure and fulfilment, but most of all for your undying grace, revealed through Christ Jesus, your Son, our Saviour, without whom we are hopeless, lost and helpless.

Amazing God, as we consider your holiness, we know that, despite our efforts to live as you call us to, we still fall short of what we ought to be. Merciful Lord, we confess that we often fail to love and serve you wholeheartedly and show by our words and deeds that we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves. We confess, too, there are times when our discipleship is half-hearted and occasions when we ignore your call. Help us to turn from self-centred to Christ-centred lives and pardon us in Jesus' holy name.

'Lord, in your mercy',**'hear our prayer'**.

Gracious God, you hear and answer our prayers and open your arms to embrace us with forgiveness. As we have been freed from the burden of guilt, may we respond to your grace by loving and serving you and our neighbours, faithfully and joyfully, so we may honour you in his holy name. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

Our Father, in heaven, hallowed be your Name; your kingdom come; your will be done; on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen.

We shall sing the first hymn on our sheets to sing a new version of a hymn I wrote twenty years ago, but modified a couple of weeks ago. It is sung to the lovely melody, 'Herongate' which I hope you will recognize.

- 1. For motherhood we thank you, Lord:
the care we all would like to know;
for mothers' love seeks no reward,
but nurtures us and helps us grow.**
- 2. Poor Hannah wept in her distress
when at Shiloh's shrine she prayed;
and when God cured her barrenness,
honoured the promise she had made.**
- 3. Young Mary heard the angel say
that she would bear God's own dear Son,
fulfilled her duties, come what may
and prayed, "Now let God's will be done."**
- 4. Our Mother Church was born to heal
this broken world with selfless love:
by serving all the truth reveal
that 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 face each test,
in Jesus' name our call fulfil.**

M. Rider (To "Herongate" CMP 346) Modified 28th February, 2024

In our prayers of intercession when I say, 'Your kingdom come', your response is 'Your will be done'. Let us pray.

Most gracious and amazing God, we rejoice in this beautiful, wonderful planet on which we live as well as in your sustaining grace. However, we are aware of the world's brokenness, more often than not as a result of human pride, selfishness, cruelty, avarice or indifference. We recognize that you have blessed us throughout our lives and so we ask you to help us to play our part in heal some of the world's brokenness, however small our role may be. We know, too, that while our powers are limited, no situation is beyond yours, so we ask you to intervene by warming the hearts of people who possess power and influence to act for the wellbeing of all people.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

We pray for our church, the churches in the area and, indeed, the World Church. Guide us how best to serve our communities and help us to find new ways, to not only preach Good News but to live it day by day; to be a light of hope in a self-centred, sin-darkened world.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done**

Heavenly Father, we pray for peace to be established in the world, for an end to fighting in Ukraine and Palestine in particular and for peaceful resolutions to disputes between other countries before they escalate into warfare. Teach national leaders to seek the ways of mercy and justice through which lasting peace may be established, to negotiate and compromise instead of using force against opponents. Lord, remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and oppression. Grant them all the courage and support they need to rebuild their lives, as well as healing them in body, mind and spirit.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Lord of power and might, guide those who govern us and their advisors to adopt policies that will bring us safely through these challenging times while meeting the needs of vulnerable groups. Give them courage and wisdom to do what is right, whether or not it is popular, to set aside self-interest for the wellbeing of all.

Lord, we ask your blessing upon the NHS as it faces the demands of both winter and industrial disputes. Provide the resources and leadership it needs to keep us all safe and healthy. We pray for care-workers in both homes and the community, that they, too, can fulfil their duties, ease the pressures on the NHS by reducing bed-blocking and that they find satisfaction in their work.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Heavenly Father, hear our prayer for people who are sick in body, mind or spirit, for all who are who are living with a dementia and those who care for them. We pray for everybody who faces unemployment, debt, addictions, broken relationships, loneliness and bereavement. May they receive the care and support they need and may they also experience your presence in their need. In a time of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help.....

May we be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we offer friendship and practical support to them, but we pray that you will enfold them in the warmth of your love, so they receive healing, hope, courage and enduring peace.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Abba, Heavenly Father, fill the heart of everybody who is worshiping here with the love of our Saviour Jesus, so we may nurture and support both friend and stranger, living out the Gospel message and bringing you glory in his wonderful name. Amen.

Our Old Testament reading is 1 Samuel chapter 1 verses 7 to 18

This went on year after year; whenever they went to the house of the LORD, Peninnah would upset Hannah so much that she would cry and refuse to eat anything. Her husband Elkanah would ask her,

“Hannah, why are you crying? Why won’t you eat? Why are you always so sad? Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?”

One day, after they had finished their meal in the house of the LORD at Shiloh, Hannah got up. She was deeply distressed, and she cried bitterly as she prayed to the LORD. Meanwhile, Eli the priest was sitting in his place by the door. Hannah made a solemn promise: “Almighty LORD, look at me, your servant! See my trouble and remember me! Don’t forget me! If you give me a son, I promise that I will dedicate him to you for his whole life and that he will never have his hair cut.”

Hannah continued to pray to the LORD for a long time, and Eli watched her lips. She was praying silently; her lips were moving, but she made no sound. So Eli thought that she was drunk, and said to her,

“Stop making a drunken show of yourself! Stop your drinking and sober up!”

“No, I’m not drunk, sir,” she answered. “I haven’t been drinking! I am desperate, and I have been praying, pouring out my troubles to the LORD. Don’t think I am a worthless woman. I have been praying like this because I’m so miserable.”

“Go in peace,” Eli said, “and may the God of Israel give you what you have asked him for.”

“May you always think kindly of me,” she replied. Then she went away, ate some food, and was no longer sad. Amen.

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

At that time the Emperor Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Roman Empire. When this first census took place, Quirinius was the governor of Syria.

Everyone, then, went to register himself, each to his own town.

Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to the town of Bethlehem in Judea, the birthplace of King David. Joseph went there because he was a descendant of David. He went to register with Mary, who was promised in marriage to him. She was pregnant, and while they were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to have her baby. She gave birth to her first son, wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger—there was no room for them to stay in the inn.

The time came for Joseph and Mary to perform the ceremony of purification, as the Law of Moses commanded. So they took the child to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, as it is written in the law of the Lord: “Every firstborn male is to be dedicated to the Lord.” They also went to offer a sacrifice of a pair of doves or two young pigeons, as required by the law of the Lord.

At that time there was a man named Simeon living in Jerusalem. He was a good, God-fearing man and was waiting for Israel to be saved. The Holy Spirit was with him and had assured him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s promised Messiah. Led by the Spirit, Simeon went into the Temple. When the parents brought the child Jesus into the Temple to do for him what the Law required, Simeon took the child in his arms and gave thanks to God:

“Now, Lord, you have kept your promise, and you may let your servant go in peace. With my own eyes I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples: A light to reveal your will to the Gentiles and bring glory to your people Israel.”

The child’s father and mother were amazed at the things Simeon said about him. Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother,

“This child is chosen by God for the destruction and the salvation of many in Israel. He will be a sign from God which many people will speak against and so reveal their secret thoughts. And sorrow, like a sharp sword, will break your own heart.” 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. 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!**

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Address: Mothering Sunday

On Mothering Sunday, we not only consider characteristics of and celebrate motherhood, but also Mother Church. It is not the same as Mothers’ Day, an American celebration which began in Grafton, Virginia during May 1908, after Anna Jarvis decided to raise the profile of all mothers, following the death of her own, beloved mother. Mothering Sunday is an old Church tradition, when on the fourth Sunday in Lent, apprentices were given a day’s leave to visit their mother and were often given a cake as a present for their mother. Each reading compares and contrasts mothers’ and God’s love, of human and divine compassion.

Three thousand years ago, an Israelite, Elkanah, had two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. Peninnah had several children, but Hannah was unable to conceive. It wasn’t only childlessness that hung heavily on Hannah, but how Peninnah tormented her about it. Nowadays, childlessness still causes great heartache, especially among women who have postponed a family in favour of career advancement and find it harder to conceive. However, Three thousand years ago, childless women were stigmatised as cursed, or a disgrace to their husband and wives like Hannah, were often mocked by other, more fertile women. As a result of her sense of shame and Peninnah’s unkindness, Hannah prayed so fervently in the tabernacle at Shiloh the priest, Eli, mistook her passion for drunkenness. He rebuked her strongly until she assured him she was troubled in spirit,

not by spirits! His indignation was softened when Hannah explained what the matter was and he added his prayer to hers as she left.

Imagine her joy when she conceived and bore a healthy baby boy, whom she named 'Samuel' after her prayer to God. Samuel means 'The Lord answered my prayer', so you'd expect Hannah to keep Samuel close, to have cherished, if not spoilt him, for she was unlikely to have expected another child. Instead, she recognised 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 and dedicated him to the Lord. The First Book of Samuel records how faithfully Samuel honoured his mother's promise. He became a vital figure in Jewish history, a blessing to his people – showering love and faith he'd learned from Hannah in his infancy, upon the people. The story of Samuel's presentation shows how Hannah responded to the generosity of God's love by giving her longed-for son back to Him, to serve as intercessor for the Jewish people in troubled times.

When God took human form to become our Saviour, he chose a young woman, Mary, to bear Jesus. She wasn't married, but was betrothed and at that time, in Jewish society betrothal was a binding contract needing bill of divorce to end it – not just returning the engagement ring! In spite of certain scandal and probable danger – a betrothed yet unmarried woman could be stoned to death if suspected of adultery – Mary obeyed God's wishes, even though the responsibility of raising any child, let alone Jesus, must have been challenging for so young a woman. However, the Magnificat, Mary's hymn of praise, shows her faithful response to God's call, rather than her rejection of the angel's words.

When she and Joseph went to the temple for the ritual purification and presentation ceremonies required for a first-born son, they encountered a devout man who had been waiting for the Messiah and who'd been led to them by the Holy Spirit. This 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 and on Good Friday we shall remember when her worst fears were realized, as Mary, her friends and John stood at the foot of the cross on which Jesus hung, dying. It's 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 Deuteronomic curse, "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." Jesus died accursed for our sins. Imagine Mary's feelings: her agony as she saw beloved son die; 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 significance of Jesus' death until after the first Easter. All she'd had seen was failure at Calvary, not victory over power of Satan & death.

Mary showed sacrificial, maternal love, covered by the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek 'agapeo' – God's love. '**Raham**' has a root meaning love **emanating from the womb – not the heart** – so a mother's love is closely linked to God's! When we think of maternal love, we think of an unbreakable bond – like God's love for us; love that not only took Jesus to Calvary, but raised him from death, breaking the power of sin and death for everyone's sake, so anyone has the opportunity to turn to the Lord and be saved – right until last millisecond of time. Whilst the Church is often called the Bride of Christ, she embodies important parts of God's character: steadfastness; caring; resilience; nurturing; patience; compassion & hospitality.

As members of the church, we're called to be as faithful and caring as Hannah and Mary, to trust in God and do his will in response to his grace – even if our service causes us grief at times. **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. 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. © Jan Struther {1901 - 1953}**

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.