

2013 March 11am

Salisbury Diocesan Mothers' Union Festival Service of Commissioning and Admission

Exodus 2:1-10

John 19:25b-27

Welcomes and thank yous

What a wonderful occasion was the admittance of new members of the Mothers' Union which we've just experienced, and wonderfully inclusive: young and old, men and women, people in different circumstances. Thank you for the honour of making me a member. I am so pleased you decided years ago to admit men as well as women, though it must have seemed to some at the time to be 'a category error', slippery slope or thin end of the wedge. But relationships between women and men have changed sufficiently to need some new thought and I am one of a number of men admitted to membership today who thank you for it. And thank you to the officers of the Salisbury Diocesan Mothers' Union and our Deanery branches, and each of you for your own commitment and work as part of the Mothers' Union. And thank you to Joanne Triffitt, your remarkable Development Officer, for all the work she does. She's so good that you want another one!

It is great to welcome Bishop Hilary this morning. I was delighted that Bishop Graham who was in the South Sudan a fortnight ago, brought me back a gift from Rebecca Ator, a Mothers' Union development worker in the diocese of Malakal.

Mothers' Union Worldwide

Yesterday was International Women's Day, celebrating women. The focus was on greater gender equality so the Mothers' Union is giving a lead, even if the Church of England as a whole is not. Many initiatives in the less developed countries are focussed on women, their homes and families. The best micro finance projects are nearly all with women rather than men.

A friend was the parish priest in a large, violent, Black, Township parish in the Cape during the tumultuous decade that led White South Africans to recognise that Apartheid must come to an end. He told me about his Mothers' Union prayer group that met on Friday afternoons. They gathered to pray for their men, that they would come home from work safely with their pay packets. My friend said, "When they prayed in the Lord's Prayer, 'Give us this day our daily bread', they really meant it."

A member of the congregation in my previous church went as a missionary doctor to work in Malawi. Often she would send a newsletter with photographs, including the Mothers' Union dressed in their blue and white uniforms working in the fields and praying and singing in church.

When I went to the South Sudan for their Provincial Synod in November 2011 the business on the final day ran on by about 3 hours. When 160 people eventually emerged, the work of the Synod having been done, we moved straight to dinner organised by the Mothers' Union who made it look as though we had arrived just on time and then led the singing and dancing in celebrations into the night. Canon Ian Woodward (who was there), and I were talking with Bishop Hilary before this service and Ian said that the women of the Mothers' Union in the Sudans have been courageous, brave and prominent, holding their families and the wider society together through the years of conflict and warfare.

Women, out of their commitment to family life, make communities work.

Biblical families

Those of us who have just been admitted to membership of the Mothers' Union will have had to think quite hard about Jesus' teaching on marriage and family life in order to make our promises to support the Mothers' Union's Aims and Objectives. Of course the life and teaching of Jesus was set in a Jewish framework of the Ten Commandments but the Biblical patterns of family life are much more varied and complex than we usually let on.

We don't know much about Jesus' growing up in the family home of Mary and Joseph in Nazareth. In his preaching he says that the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding, by which I think, he must have meant that these are occasions when love and joy are evident and the community gathers in support of faithful love.

There's the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee, the first miracle in John's Gospel, when the water was turned into wine. But that's not so much about the wedding as it is an 'on the third day story'. "On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee"; this is a resurrection story. It is about the transformation of ordinary life, water into wine. It is about the transformation of the old order, water in stone jars for purification. And it happened when the mother of Jesus told them to do what he said, to obey him.

Tomorrow is Mothering Sunday and the readings in today's service are taken from the lectionary readings for Mothering Sunday. In the story of Moses and the bull rushes, Pharaoh's daughter is a key person in making it possible for Moses to grow into adulthood. The Egyptians are like an extended family so that Moses can grow into God's servant. There's an extended family.

And the Gospel reading was of Jesus on the cross in John's Gospel. When I am with the parents of a child who has died, I often think about Mary who at the Annunciation was told by an angel that she is going to give birth to Jesus the Son of God, "And pondered all these things in her heart," with all the hope and wonder of a mother; *and* who followed him on the way of the cross. In John's Gospel we are told, "There at the foot of the cross stood Mary his mother". Hers was sacrificial love. Yet the short passage we had as our Gospel reading continues,

"When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."

There's an extended family. It is the loving provision of a dying son but it is also of a piece with the life and proclamation of Jesus, who showed that God's kingdom is for all – Jews and Samaritans and all sorts, men and women, and especially the poor, sick and outcast. In Jesus, salvation comes from the Jews for the whole world. His family is anyone who seeks the kingdom of God.

Mark 10:28-30

Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age...

Matthew 12:46-49

While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, 'Look, your mother and your brothers

are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’

The family that Jesus recreates is the whole human family, made new again by the loving purposes of God. This is the Gospel of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and of resurrection in which when things go badly wrong we find God is still with us and we are enabled to start again by the power of the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Mothering Sunday

Tomorrow is the 100th anniversary of the re-invention of Mothering Sunday in the Church of England. In 1913 Constance Penswick-Smith, whose father was the Vicar of Coddington in Nottinghamshire caught the vision to celebrate Mothering Sunday. It is an ancient vision, really, but one she renewed. It has taken root in our society, not just in church, a day when we all give thanks for our mothers. As with the Mothers’ Union, the celebration has changed over the years. I often find flowers are given in church to men as well as women. The prayers are not just in thanksgiving for happy family life but nearly always include those whose family is difficult, and those whose marriages have broken down. There is the recognition that stuff happens, and broken families and divorce are not the unforgiveable sin. All people are held in the life and fellowship of the church.

One of the reasons why Christianity has been so successful as a worldwide missionary religion has been its ability to take root in very different sorts of places and cultures. It has adapted in ways that have made the Christian Gospel known in places in the first millennium of the Church as different as Athens and Rome, Britain and North Africa, Syria and China; and in our day as different as Peshawar and San Francisco, South Sudan and Salisbury. We now see the diversity of our world as God’s gift of creation and in the Church the cultural diversity of Christians is something we enjoy: God in Christ among us gaining different expression in our varied cultures. It creates strains, of course. What do we need to hold to? What is always and everywhere the same? For Christians in each place God in Christ is known among us as Lord and Saviour. In each time place we have to work out what it means to live in response to that.

There has been a social revolution in this country in our life time. As a Church we continue to say that sex and marriage go together, but nearly half the children born in this country in the last year were born to unmarried parents. 42% of marriages end in divorce. True, those who go to church are more committed to marriage than the population as a whole, but we differ only by a few %. The revolution has affected us all, Church and society. We can hold out an ideal *and* we have to work with reality, particularly because the Christian Church looks so very vulnerable to the charge of hypocrisy when it comes to matters of sexuality at the moment. This is a moment when the Church might be a little shy about telling others how we think they can behave better and learn again to exercise humility and service in the manner of Jesus Christ.

In this service our prayers have been about planting seeds and letting God give the growth, about our looking to see signs of growth and what is ripe for harvest, and asking how to share in God’s work. There is some fantastic work being done by the Mothers’ Union in this diocese in serving both the church and wider community and caring for those in need. This is the task of the whole Christian community. We give thanks for seeds being sown in service and sacrificial love. What Jesus calls us to celebrate is relationships which are loving, faithful, true, life-giving, creative and fruitful; lives which point to God, to whom be the glory now and in forever. Amen