

I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am aware it's Mother's Day, although I won't be sending my mother a card. Not because I'm mean or because I don't love her, simply that she'd wonder why I was sending her a card as Mothering Sunday in England was several months ago. I'm pleased to say that I did remember to send her a card then. However I will be bearing in mind that it's Mother's Day as we turn to look together at this passage in Saint John. The Gospel that I've just read, the passage set for today is the last section in a long few chapters in the Bible in John's Gospel called The Farewell Discourse, where Jesus addresses his disciples at length the night before he dies.

Our readings over the last few weeks have been taken from this discourse, which is why it sounds familiar, because in those three chapters Jesus circles around similar things in a kind of spiral, coming back to the same things over and over again. He keeps looping back. One of the things which is on that loop which we see reappearing here is the theme of love. We see in the middle of the reading Jesus says, "So that the world may know that You have sent me and have loved them even as You have loved me." The whole discourse ends with this, "So that the love with which You have loved me may be in them."

We shouldn't be surprised by the emphasis which Saint John places on this theme of love. The most famous verse in his gospel, 3:16, begins, "For God so loved the world that He sent His son." For him the beginning of the whole Christian tradition is something motivated and begins with an act of love on God's behalf. He understands himself in the gospel, when he refers to himself he calls himself the disciple whom Jesus loved. Love is a dominant theme in John's gospel. He keeps coming back to love. I'm going to follow that lead this morning and look in some detail of the nature of the love which Jesus is describing in these verses.

My jumping off point is that lovely canticle the choir sang which began with the words, "Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you, you are gentle with us as a mother with her children." We hear echoes there, particularly a verse in Isaiah where God says, "Can a mother forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? So I will not forget you." On this mother's day we should be mindful that the Bible

encourages us to understand God's attitude to us to be that of a parent towards their child, that analogy is drawn throughout the Bible, Old and New Testament.

Let me draw out three characteristics of the ideal of maternal love, and I realize I'm talking about an ideal here which not everybody has experienced, but three things that we would hope to find in maternal love, which help us to understand the love that Jesus is talking about in this passage from Saint John. Firstly maternal love, when it's working as we hope it would do, knows no bounds. In Jeremiah 31 God says to His people, "I have loved you with an everlasting love," a love which has no bounds. I heard an amazing interview just before I left to come over here on the BBC with the mother of someone who's very famous in England, not so much over here, called Pete Doherty. He's famous as a pop star, the onetime husband of the super model Kate Moss, but sadly he's most famous as a high profile drug addict who's often in the news for various scrapes he's got himself into.

His mother was a very sensible woman of faith and she told to length in this interview about her Peter. It was an incredibly sad and emotional interview. She sounded completely exhausted and helpless. She reminisced about Peter as a boy. She remembered the many good years, but then she recounted his slow decline into drugs. He wasn't himself anymore, he was unpredictable. Sometimes he'd go off for months and they wouldn't know where he was. Then he'd reappear and they'd have no idea how to deal with him. She didn't know what was the best line to take. Her husband had obviously decided to show tough love and wouldn't have anything to do with him while still taking drugs. She could see the value in that approach, but she couldn't do that herself. She said, "He's still my son. I still love him."

In a very beautiful chapter in the Old Testament book of Hosea we hear God speaking like Pete Doherty's mother, as a grieving parent. The chapter begins like this, "When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called them the more they went from me, they kept sacrificing to the Baals and offering incense to idols." Then later on when the sins of Israel have been recounted God says, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender."

That's the voice of God grieving over his errant child, Israel.

The second characteristic of maternal love is that it always wants what's best for their child. This is the context in which we should read what Jesus says in this passage about unity, He praised earnestly that His disciples be one. What does this mean? Does it mean that Christian denominations are a bad thing? Should we strive to pursue an ecumenical ideal and break down denominational barriers? I don't think so. This week I met with Paul, the minister of the Presbyterian church next door, and Chuck, the pastor of the AME church on Eads. We had a great time, a fellowship praying together. We weren't discussing about how we could all become one congregation and worship in the same building, but we were expressing the unity that we have in Jesus Christ, the oneness that we already have in Him.

Let's think about good mothering. If you've got a pair of children, like I have a younger sibling, my mother took great delight in dressing us in the same clothes, which is cute when your children are 5 and 3. I know from family photographs that I think my mother pushed it a bit and we were 10 and 12, still wearing the same clothes. If your mother's still dressing you the same as a pair of siblings when you're 42 and 40 that's just weird, because what's best for a child isn't that they're the same as the sibling, that they dress the same, they look the same, they have the same interest. That's not in their best interest. A good mother realizes that and seeks to help a child find their own true identity, distinct from any sibling.

To me Christian unity is about all God's people with their individualities, their different traditions and ways of expressing their faith, being able to articulate the unity that all God's people have in Jesus. Unity doesn't mean uniformity. Having said that, there is a message for us here as a congregation I think in this passage. We much as a church family, a community of believers here at Saint James seek unity, that we might strive after the oneness that Jesus is talking about here. I went on a clergy study day a couple of weeks ago, it was about church growth, where I learned that the single biggest factor which leads to a decline in the number of members in a congregation is conflict. The opposite of this is true, that a united outward focused loving community would always experience growth because that's attractive. I'm pleased to say here at Saint James I

think we're on the way to making that transition. We are becoming more and more united and unified in love. I see that in meetings where different opinions are expressed and respected. We're working at getting better in caring for those in our community in need. We're striving to become a kinder community. A unified community can do so much more for God.

I read a sad story this week about a couple whose child went missing. As soon as they realized that their son was gone they frantically started to look for him. Their neighbors joined in as they heard the news and they went all over the village looking for lost child. Eventually the whole village was involved in this search and they were running all over the place, calling out the child's name trying to find him. Then a wise old man said, "Look, this won't do. Let's organize the search." They all joined hands and marched through the fields and the woods. He said, "If we do that we'll find the child." When they did as they were told, when everyone in the community joined hands, they came upon a pile of snow. They brushed the snow aside and found there the frozen body of the child. The heartbroken parents cried out in grief, "If only we joined hands earlier."

Coming together, joining hands is transformational. There's a miracle of love in that epistle, the story from Acts we read, that long story. We might have missed the miracle at the end because it was full of the story of earthquakes and healings, but I want to mention instead the miracle at the end, which is Paul and Silas' attitude to the jailer. The jailer was involved in their flogging, put them in the innermost cell and locked them in stocks. But when the earthquake came and they were released and they escaped, there was no hint of revenge on Paul and Silas' part. Love led them to speak to the jailer about Jesus.

The last characteristic of love that I want to mention is that maternal love is always unconditional. Children don't have to earn their mother's love. There was a man in Bangkok called Savan who got caught up in the dark world of drugs and prostitution. He got as low as selling nine year old girls. He got rich off this, but things started to go very wrong when a rumor spread that he was a police spy, and he needed to escape the city. In the midst of his fear he remembered his family, especially his parents who were simple Christian people from a town in the south of the city. He'd left many years before but he hadn't forgotten the words that they left

him with, their final words as he departed were, "We're waiting for you."

He thought, "I wonder if my parents will still be waiting after all these years and all the disrepute I've brought to the family name." There was only one way to find out so he wrote a letter to them, apologizing and saying he was coming home. He said, "I'm arriving on the Saturday night train. If you're still waiting for me will you please tie a piece of cloth on the pole tree at the end of the road, because I don't want to have to face the awkwardness if understandably you don't want to see me again." As he got near the house he panicked, he got nervous. He couldn't bear to look so he asked the man next to him on the train to look out the window and see if they could see anything on the pole tree. The man looked out of the window and Savan said to him, "What do you see?" He said, "I see a tree and it's covered, every branch, with a white cloth on it."

His parents were still waiting, just as the father in the story of the prodigal son was waiting, every night going out to see if his wayward son was coming home. Maternal love doesn't have to be earned, it's always there waiting. We see that expressed in that beautiful passage from Revelation we heard read. "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' Let anyone who hears say, 'Come.' Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift." Divine love comes as a gift, not as a reward.

In conclusion let me say two things. One about what all this says about God, secondly what it all means for us. Firstly I think what I've been saying reveals the uniqueness of the Christian understanding of God. In the classical tradition God was thought of, and the special word was, impassible. He was unaffected by anything outside of Himself. God was self contained. He didn't have emotions, He didn't feel, He didn't suffer. He was simply God. But we've seen how God is understood in the Christian tradition as a loving parent, that's the imagery that we're called to use when thinking of God.

On this Mother's Day we've seen how God loves with a maternal kind of love, a love which knows no bounds, which always wants the best, and is unconditional. As any parent knows, loving like this makes us vulnerable. This is costly, self sacrificial kind of love, a very unusual kind of love to put onto God, to say that God loves us with that kind of love, but that's how the Bible encourages us to think. Secondly, what does this say

about us? It means that we are the objects of this kind of divine love. God loves each one of us with the kind of love that I've been describing. It might be that some of us find that hard to accept because we have an image of God which keeps us from receiving that kind of love, or understanding it. If we think of God as angry or as a judge, someone who keeps score, then this message will be hard to accept. But on this Mother's Day let us seek to rest or abide in the warm embrace of the God who loves us.

Amen.