

Sermon 27 March 2022 Mothering Sunday

Colossians 3:12-17 John 19:25-27

Today we in our church calendar we celebrate Mothering Sunday. John's gospel refers to four women gathered at the foot of the cross as Jesus went through his last agonising moments, and this included his mother, Mary. What agony and heartbreak this must have been for her. Not only does she have to witness, and therefore feel, his pain but she has to see him die. No mother should have to do this.

Whenever I read about a man committing a terrible crime (not always, but more often than not it's a man!), my heart immediately goes out to the mother. It must break her heart, whoever she is. How often, following a terrible crime, have we heard a mother say, 'He is still my son, and I love him.' This, of course, is the epitome of unconditional love. This is the sort of love that is promoted and encouraged by Jesus Christ. It is the sort of love we subscribe to as Christians but whether we are up to the challenge of putting it into practice is another matter. All too often we let both ourselves and God down.

As part of my Lenten commitment, I am presently reading a book by my favourite Christian author, Philip Yancey. It is called, 'Where the Light Fell,' and it deals with his early life. His father died when he was very young and he and his brother were brought up by their mother. She was very involved in their church, a Southern Baptist church. At church she was highly respected and widely liked; she was seen as a model Christian. Unfortunately, at home it was a different story. She constantly abused Philip and his brother, usually verbally and even physically occasionally.

He recounts how on one occasion his mother was hurling abuse at the two of them when the phone rings. It was a member of their church. Her persona immediately changed and she exuded sweetness. When she put the phone down, her face changed and she continued the abuse. It drove Philip away from religion, but fortunately he returned as he rediscovered his faith.

Why do I tell that story when we are celebrating unconditional love? Because I want to highlight the fact that it is difficult, very difficult to actually put into practice. We are human; we are fallible; we do let ourselves and God down. But in the end, we must constantly strive to put that unconditional love into practice.

In our Colossians reading, Paul says, 'Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together on perfect harmony.' There is no question that love will hold any relationship together. Without that ability to forgive, because in the end that is really what unconditional love is all about, any relationship will falter and fail.

Paul then goes on to say, 'And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.' The verb he uses for *rule* is the word used to describe the ruling of an umpire in a sporting match, whatever that sport may be. In other words, if you take on board the peace of Christ, the love of Christ, you are in! If you don't, you are out! I love the imagery, and it is vivid imagery. If you want to win, and who doesn't want to win, then it is most important, it is essential that we take on board unconditional love as advocated by the Christian faith.

Love sustains, love enables growth, love heals. I want to finish with a story that illustrates the healing power of love.

Some years ago, Reader's Digest carried a moving story about a baby boy in a Milwaukee Hospital. The baby was blind and mentally challenged. The baby didn't respond to sound or touch. His parents, for a variety of reasons, were unable to look after him. The hospital didn't know what to do with the baby. Then someone thought of May Lempke, a 52 year-old nurse who lived nearby. She had raised five children of her own and she would know how to take care of him. They asked May to take the infant, saying, 'He will probably die young.' May responded, 'If I take the baby, he won't die young, and I'll be happy to take him.'

May called the baby, Leslie. It was not easy to care for him. Every day she prayed over him, she cried over him, she poured out her love for him. This continued until Leslie reached 16 years. One day May noticed Leslie's finger plucking a taut string on a parcel. She wondered what this meant. Was it possible he was sensitive to music?

May began to surround Leslie with music. She played every type of music imaginable, hoping that one type might appeal to him. Eventually, May bought an old second-hand piano and put it in Leslie's room. May took Leslie's fingers and showed him how to push the keys down, but she wasn't sure that she was getting through to him.

Then one night May awoke to the sound of someone playing Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto. She and her husband crept downstairs and what they discovered was beyond their wildest dreams. Leslie was sitting at the piano. He was smiling and playing the piece by ear. May got to her knees and prayed, 'Thank you, dear God, thank you.'

Soon Leslie began to live at the piano. He played classical, country-western and gospel. All the music May has played for him was stored in his brain and was now flowing through his hands to the piano. Leslie went on to play concerts. He even appeared on national television. Doctors cannot explain this phenomenon. May can – the power of love.

This story dramatizes in a moving way the tremendous power of love. Through love, God has put at our disposal the greatest power there is in the world. It can change lives, but even on an everyday basis, it is the most nourishing, assuring, essential thing we have and the great news is every single one of us has the ability to provide it.

Rev Warner Wilder