

2023 March 5th - Second Sunday of Lent.

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121;

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

A favourite creative writing exercise at school is to set an essay entitled "My first love". It's interesting to see what the children write about. Mainly they write about their pets: their beloved hamster, rabbit or family dog. Sometimes they write about their toys: their teddy, dolly or comfort blanket. Occasionally they write about a boyfriend or girlfriend - but most have the sense not actually to open up about the interior workings of their heart to their English teacher, who really only wants to know if they can spell properly and organise their sentences!

It is interesting that when they write about their first love they usually write about something that can't actually love them back. I mean, their dog may jump up and wag his tail when they get in from school; the hamster may do extra turns on its running wheel, and who knows what heartfelt conversations the teddy has with its owner under the bedclothes, but really the love that the pet or the toy shews is a reflection of the love the child bestows.

I wonder, if I set God the exercise of writing on his first love, what he would write. Perhaps today's writings tell us. We first meet Abraham in Genesis and see God's great love for him as he promises him a son and from that son countless descendants, including the descendant through whom all the world will be blessed. We meet Abraham again in Romans, where the writer says that God blessed Abraham not because Abraham deserved it or earned it or achieved it, but because Abraham believed in God and trusted in God's blessing and so received his blessing. Abraham's love for God was a reflection of God's love for him; Abraham could not love God on his own without God filling him with love, giving him love, enabling him to receive love and then reflect it back.

That love which is given freely to another who cannot love in return, but who, if loved enough, can start to reflect that love, is the love

we give to our children. The love we give to a tiny helpless baby so that they can learn what love is, that they are loveable, that they can give love back and give love away.

That is the love God gave to Abraham. If we think that Abraham was God's first love we are not looking closely enough at the readings. Because, although God poured out his love on Abraham, his love spread wider than just one man, deeper than just one family, greater than just one people or nation. Through Abraham God blessed the world, through Abraham and his descendants, culminating in Jesus, God loved the whole world so that the world could learn to love him back.

And so, when Jesus meets Nicodemus by night, one of the things Jesus says to Nicodemus is "So God loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved."

Nicodemus was looking for a way to draw close to God and he recognised that Jesus came from God and brought God with him. But Nicodemus seemed to think that somehow he had to do something to attract God to him, he had to do something to make God come to him, he had to do something to make God love him. That's why Nicodemus said "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" But Jesus tells him and tells us that we cannot do anything to earn God's love, we cannot demand God's love, but that God loves us nevertheless, and will continue to offer us that love to teach us to be lovely like him.

Perhaps, if you have given up something in Lent so that you have some free time, you could spend some of it basking in God's love for you and reflecting that love back to him.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5p2F7P8uTQ>

*Stainer's setting of "God so loved the world",
sung by the Manchester Chorale.*

2023 March 12th - Third Sunday of Lent.

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11; John 4:5-42.

I just about remember the long, hot, dry summer of 1976. I was a very little girl, but I do remember frequent visits to the seaside (possibly the only summer on record when the East Kent Coast was not too bracing for swimming!), my father's Heath-Robinson water-recycling for irrigating the garden, and images on John Craven's Newsround of people having to fetch water from standpipes at the end of the road. How I envied those people whose water had been cut off and who were relying on buckets and standpipes! How I longed to carry a bucket or a jug to the end of the street to fill it up! How amazed I was that my mother didn't share my excitement at the prospect! I now understand my mother's point of view, but at the time I thought that standpipes seemed exotic and romantic.

Water. We are so used to it we never really give it a second thought. Although global warming is having an impact on rainfall, the British Isles are still green and pleasant lands. But, in the Middle East water is scarce and in previous centuries all water had to be obtained directly from rivers, cisterns, wells or natural springs. Going to the well was a necessary daily chore.

People have speculated about why the Samaritan woman was going to the well at the hottest part of the day. We know by her own admission that her living arrangements were unorthodox. Perhaps she was going to the well now to avoid seeing anyone who might comment unfavourably, or perhaps she'd just run out of water. Who knows why she was there, but there she was.



She is surprised when Jesus asked her for a drink. She knew that he was a Jew and

Jews and Samaritans did not share anything in common: not towns, not conversation, not food and drink. She is even more surprised when Jesus says he could give her the water of life.

Her first response is bewilderment, "how can you do that if you haven't got a bucket to get the water out of the well?" Then she is intrigued, once Jesus says that his water will quench thirst for ever. Then she is defensive once Jesus proves to know the truth about her marital status.

She tries to deflect him with a well-worn argument. The Jews said that the only place for God's temple was in Jerusalem; the Samaritans said the only place was in Samaria. The argument had lasted for hundreds of years, but was still a live debate, and surely it would deflect this good Jewish rabbi from her private life.

Jesus does indeed enter into the debate, but in a new way. He doesn't insist on the spiritual superiority of Jerusalem, but rather on the spiritual availability of God. God is not the private possession of any one group, but is reaching out to everyone who turns to him in spirit and in truth, by the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of the Messiah, the Christ.

The woman is convinced that in this encounter she has met the Messiah. She tells the people in the city that he is the Messiah because he knows everything she has ever done. Perhaps she was just referring to his knowledge of her messy relationships, but I think there is more to it than that.

She recognises the truth about Jesus after he has talked to her about those who worship the Father in spirit and in truth, those who are seeking for God and respond when he finds them. Perhaps this woman was one of those who is seeking God, one of those who longs to worship him in spirit and in truth, to encounter him for real, not just mediated through someone else's experience, but to know him for real, for truth. Certainly when she tells the other Samaritans about him they believe, not because of what she says, but because they come to know Jesus for themselves and in him encountered God for real.

I wonder if you are thirsty for that real encounter with God? I wonder if you can quench the thirst of someone else by pouring out God for them?

image: **Duccio di Buoninsegna. The Samaritan Woman.**
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

**2023 March 19th - Fourth Sunday of Lent -
Mothering Sunday, Refreshment Sunday, Laetare Sunday.**
1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14, John 9.

Today we are just over half-way through Lent. We have reached a brief break in the Lenten austerity, and so today is Refreshment Sunday, or Laetare Sunday (from the Latin verb *laetari*: to rejoice). Today is also Mothering Sunday, not Mothers' Day, which is a modern American invention, but Mothering Sunday. Mothering Sunday has its origins in the Middle Ages, when people would return to the church where they were baptised and became a "child of the church", or would visit the Cathedral, the mother-church of the Diocese. Of course, people who had gone back to their home village to go to church would also see their parents, and this gave one of the associations between going a-mothering, to Mother Church, and going to visit mum.

The tradition of visiting mum on Refreshment Sunday also lies behind the tradition of taking chocolates to mum or baking a simnel cake, both of which are a tasty change from the Lenten fast.

Honouring mum on Mothering Sunday can be a charming custom, but for those who have no mother, or those who have no child, for those estranged from family, or those whose families are not safe and happy places, turning Mothering Sunday into a festival of mothers can be a painful experience.

But, if we return to the origins of Mothering Sunday, perhaps we can find room for mothers and children, and for others who might feel excluded by modern expressions of filial devotion on this day, and yet who still do God's work of mothering.

Mother Church taught her children, those baptised in the faith, to know God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When children were baptised it was the godmothers and the godfathers who promised to bring up the children to know and love God, to worship him and to pray to him. It was the godmothers and the godfathers who were charged with the responsibility of helping the newly baptised look out for God and see him at work in our world and at work in their lives.

Our Old Testament reading today was about David, anointed to be king when he was little more than a boy. He was charged with the responsibility of teaching a whole nation to look out for God; he was

entrusted with the responsibility of teaching a whole nation to know and love God, to worship him and pray to him. He didn't choose to do this, he was told to do this, and he was filled with God's Spirit so that he could do this.

I wonder if your godmothers and godfathers taught you to look out for God in our world and in your life; I wonder if they taught you to know and love God. I wonder if you are godparent to anyone and if you have taught them to know and love God, and to see him in their lives. I wonder if there is anyone, not a formal godparent, who has done this for you, or if you have opened the eyes of anyone to see God. Whether or not we have made the promises of a godparent, anyone who teaches others to know and love God and opens their eyes to see God in our midst is like a godparent, like a godmother.

Perhaps no-one has ever asked you to be a godmother and perhaps you don't think you'd be very good at helping others look for God, but you might be surprised at just whom God does call to be godmothers for his sake. In our Gospel reading the blind man's parents were too scared of the authorities to help their son see God at work in his life; the disciples were too fixated on sin to see God at work in anyone's life; the religious leaders were too fascinated by rules to see God at work in real life, but the man who was blind and whose sight was restored was able to see God at work, to recognise that Jesus brought God into his life, and to speak this truth to anyone who would listen.



The man who was born blind was not an obvious visionary for God; the youngest son of Jesse was not an obvious leader for God's people. Sometimes the most unlikely people can help us draw close to God, and know him for ourselves. I wonder who has been a godmother for you in the past year and helped you to see God in your life and in our world.

Perhaps today, Mothering Sunday, is the day to say thank you to them, and to give them a token of your thanks to refresh and encourage them to continue in their work as godmothers, godparents doing God's work in his world.

Duccio di Buoninsegna The Healing of a Blind Man. National Gallery, London

2023 March 26th - Passion Sunday

(Readings at 9am Services only)

Ezekiel 37:1-14, Psalm 130,
Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45

This Sunday marks the start of what we call Passiontide – the last two weeks of Lent leading up to Maundy Thursday, Good Friday when we re-live the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, rapidly followed by betrayal, ignominious death and apparent oblivion. This Sunday is known as Passion Sunday and it is usual to read the (very long) account of Jesus's passion and death at the main services. However this year is going to be both different and very special. We have a visit from our Diocesan Bishop, Stephen, who will be installing Revd Dr Naomi Wormell as incumbent for the four parishes in our group. Why is this important when Naomi has already been our priest for three years?

About twenty years ago the diocese felt that it needed to keep as many options open as possible in the light of falling church attendances and falling numbers of ordained ministers to serve the churches of the diocese. When vacancies occurred throughout the diocese replacement priests were licensed as 'Priest-in-Charge' rather than installed as Vicar or Rector (titles used for incumbents who have greater security of tenure). This gave the diocesan pastoral committee freedom to rearrange parish groups as it saw fit.

For all of these years our priests (Christine Sindall, Annie Gurner and Philip Tait and Naomi Wormell) have been priests-in-charge, but now it has been decided to do away with this title and restore the role as Vicar or Rector. This means greater job security for Naomi but also means that our group of churches is now unlikely to be broken up and perhaps joined with neighbouring parishes to make even larger groups. It gives our group significant security and also recognises that the diocese sees us as viable.

In the last few years the PCCs of our group parishes have been looking at ways of working more closely together, and have already started having joint PCC meetings, Most believe this to be a positive step towards greater unity. All the parishes are also exploring ways in which we can make better links with the communities which we serve. Many of these initiatives are small scale (we are after all small parishes with limited resources) but we are trying to use the resources of our buildings in helpful ways. The group website (www.cheveleygroup.org) has details of many of these activities.

It is hoped that there will be a strong turn out for this special service at St Mary's Woodditton at 11am on Sunday 26th March to celebrate with Naomi her installation and our new status. Do please pray for the future of the group, and the opportunities that are now opening up for our witness to the gospel in this place. Perhaps we can make Jesus' prayer for all believers at the end of his ministry our own:

'My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.' (John 17:20-21)