

## **MOTHERING SUNDAY SERMON by Annie Billson**

So, here we are on what is a day of celebration of motherhood. And celebrations are by their very nature good and happy and positive occasions. I decided to see what the thesaurus on my computer had to say about the word "celebration" and it came up with: "festivity; party; carnival; merriment; festival; gala; revel" amongst others - all these words indicating happiness, gaiety, laughter, and more.

In our Gospel reading for today (Luke 22:33-35) we hear about the baby Jesus being presented in the Temple. At the time, I imagine that Mary, the mother of this precious baby who was not much more than a month old, would have just about been settling into the joys of her new-found motherhood, and relishing in her nurture of this new little life. But Simeon in this Gospel reading doesn't speak to Mary of joy. Far from it. He not only prophesies the ups and the downs of Jesus' life, but warns Mary: "a sword will pierce your own soul too".

We speak of "the joy of motherhood". And what a joy it is, in the main. After the emotion of the long pregnancy, and the pain and the trauma of labour and childbirth, we, unless something tragic has happened, are presented with this little bundle of joy (or in some cases "bundles" [plural] - because for many, pregnancy results in multiple births!) We experience the joy of motherhood - the joy which is so great that we soon forget the emotional and physical cost of having got to that point. All we remember afterwards is the joy.

But, if we're honest with ourselves, really, whatever the problems in getting to the point of childbirth, that point is the exact point at which our problems begin! And I'm sure all mothers will know exactly what I mean by that!

We're presented with a new, precious little human life. We've reproduced life itself and are now responsible for it. That life is the responsibility of us alone, to care for and love and nurture.

In that moment of childbirth, there lies ahead, for the vast majority of us, joy and expectation and wonder beyond measure, and laughter and gaiety described in all those words of celebration which I outlined at the beginning. And what of all those milestones?

And as a grandparent, I'm now in the privileged position of enjoying all those many milestones once more, this time in my children's children. The laughter. The merriment. The joy. The love beyond measure. Day after day brings joy and wonderment of a kind not previously experienced. Everything is new.

We can laugh at the spontaneity of youth. We can be in rapture at our children's, or grandchildren's, lack of inhibition. We can stand tall and

proud as others congratulate us on the achievements of our precious little ones.

All this, of course, is the ideal. But life isn't always a bowl of cherries, so to speak. There's often a downside. Along with all those joys go the heartache.

And life, for some, isn't always that perfect. For some there's suffering. For some young mothers there isn't a beautiful baby at the end of those nine long months, and I witnessed much suffering in my time as a hospital chaplain, when I saw much about new life that was far from perfect.

So many people come to me asking why so-and-so is suffering when they've always been such a good Christian. But Christians aren't exempt from suffering. Christians don't get a bye on ever having bad things happen to them – far from it. But still people think that those who are “good” shouldn't have bad things happen to them. But, I ask, where in the gospel does it say that?

In fact what the gospels say over and over is that following Jesus will cause us even more problems. We're continually told that our reward is not an easy life here on earth, but that our reward is eternal life with God. We're not told that God will make life easy for us. But what we are told is that He will be here with us in our suffering and hardships, helping, guiding, loving and supporting us through them.

So, when we really think about it, with motherhood, as in every other aspect of life, that metaphorical sword is always there, lurking, just ready and waiting to pierce our own souls, too. Because alongside the joy of parenthood comes the potential for hurt. I'm sure every parent will know, as I do, how our children, born as beautiful as they may be, are also born with that innate ability to hurt us. They might do it unwittingly and unintentionally, and be completely unaware of the effect of their words or actions. Or they may have reached that time in life when they're very much aware of their power and ability to manipulate and hurt. Intentional or unintentional, I doubt there's a parent today who hasn't, at some time, been deeply hurt by their child.

But, as mothers, we carry on. As mothers, metaphorically we become Mary, holding a precious new baby, knowing that a sword will pierce our souls. As mothers, metaphorically we become Hannah, sacrificing her longed-for child to God (1 Samuel:20 to end), learning by bitter experience how difficult it is to let go. Because parenthood is a seedbed for hurt and suffering, as well as a seedbed for abundant joy. Sometimes the joy and love will have the upper hand. But, sometimes it will be the hurt and suffering.

Parenthood never ends. As parents, we make ourselves vulnerable to many things. And God knows and understands and loves us in all our

vulnerability. He's with us in all of our loving. And He's with us in all of our hurting.

We may be parents or grandparents or whatever, but, even in that parenting position, we're still children ourselves – God's children. And God is our Heavenly Father. He's the one to turn to when we need Him – **WHENEVER** we need Him. He's the one we should tell about all the good and bad times. He's the one we should thank when things are good. He's the one we should turn to for help when things are bad. He's the one who'll forgive when we've fallen short. He's the one who'll always be there for us, and hear us when we speak to him. He's the only one who gives us completely unconditional love all at all times.

Next Sunday we enter the period of Passiontide. A time when we expressly remember the suffering of Jesus. At this time of the Coronavirus pandemic, when the whole world is suffering in one way or another from its effect on all our lives, now is a good time to turn to Jesus. There has surely never been a better time. And Jesus, because of his own sufferings, understands and loves us through our joy and our suffering. Amen.