

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 27th March 2022

Don't forget! British Summer Time begins this Sunday – the clocks go forward one hour, and we can eagerly look forward to more hours of daylight, warm sunshine, blue skies, and all the attendant delights that the next few months will, hopefully, bring us after the darkness and cold of winter. We won't have to close the curtains at five o'clock and put the lights on – we can quietly anticipate pottering in the garden or sitting back on a bench on the Prom watching the world go past and listening to the waves lapping on the beach. Glorious!

In my thirty years as Minister at Ayr St Columba Church, there was never a year passed but someone would turn up late for the first or second service as they had forgotten to change the clock, and the really surprised expression on their faces when they arrived at the kirk door to find that the service was half way through was priceless! Often they would parade sheepishly down the centre aisle to a space in a pew, and, of course, everyone knew fine what had happened.

And, it's Mothering Sunday too, that day set aside to both give thanks for Mother Church, the place where we are nurtured in the things of the faith, where we grow in grace and where we seek and find the Living God; and the day when we have the wonderful opportunity to acknowledge the love of our mothers, the sacrifices they made for us, and even though they may no longer be with us, we look back with deep gratitude for all that they gave to us down the years. A host of sparkling memories of such significant figure in all our lives.

I love to hear the children telling me about the cards that they have fashioned so carefully at school, the gifts that they have chosen with their pocket money, and, of course, giving Mum breakfast in bed, and poor Mums who have to smile benignly and show appropriate joy as they eat cereal swimming in milk and consume toast that is as burnt!

In England, in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, on Mothering Sunday, which always falls on the fourth Sunday of Lent, the young servants in many of the grand and stately homes were given the day off so that they could return to their own village or town and go to Mother Church on Sunday with their family, the place where they were baptised.

There was also a beautiful custom which I love which took place after morning service was over. It was known as "clipping the Church", when the congregation would leave and encircle the building and join hands and, in a sense, embrace Mother Church as her family.

That image appeals to me very strongly – all the members embracing each other and their Mother Church as one family.

And when I feel like this, I must confess I feel Dame Maggie Smith in her role as Violet, the Dowager Duchess of Grantham, pining away to buttress eroding traditions.

So this Sunday, as well as giving thanks for St Nicholas with its fine heritage, many of us can remember with a deep sense of indebtedness the churches where we grew up.

Whatever our family situation – whether we are single, married, partnered, divorced, consciously “uncoupled” as Gwyneth Paltrow says, no matter our status, we all have a place in the family of God.

Jesus told us that we are God’s children and that God loves with a father and a mother love, a love that is expansive and totally unconditional.

Do you recall several years ago the great brouhaha that erupted at the Annual Meeting of the Woman’s Guild in the Assembly Hall in Edinburgh, when the then National President, Mrs Anne Hepburn, in her opening prayer, addressed God as “Mother God.”? From Stornoway to Stirling, from Glasgow to Grantown on Spey, from Ecclefechan to Edinburgh, stalwarts of the Kirk choked on their corn flakes, and the outrage ran in the papers for a few weeks.

Yet, Mrs Hepburn was spot on. Even though Jesus calls us to address God as our Heavenly Father, it is that same God who demonstrates all the qualities of a mother love.

When the Hebrew people escaped from the captivity of slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt, poor Moses had the most difficult time with them in their wanderings through the wilderness to the Promised Land. And even when they were settled in the land “flowing with milk and honey”, they quickly forgot the rules that God had given them and abused the vulnerable and exploited the poor and indulged themselves at the expense of others.

And as you read the narrative you quickly ascertain that God mothered them the whole time with an infinite patience, as they grew from the equivalent of squabbling children to becoming mutinous and aggressive teenagers, totally self-centred and challenging God’s authority.

Still God kept on loving them as a mother gives up on any of her children.

There was a lovely hymn in the Revised Church Hymnary (remember the blue one that folk used to carry to Church every Sunday morning long ago?), and it had a verse which reads,

“Can a woman’s tender care

cease towards the child she bear?

Yes, she may forgetful be,

yet will I remember thee.”

Never giving up on any of us, God is the mothering figure to which we can aspire – demonstrating that boundless love in our own lives, the love that was so manifest in the life and ministry of our Lord Himself.

It is that Love which is the commodity of which our world is all too far short as we witness daily at home and overseas. It that Love which unites folk and breaks down barriers and walls; it is that Love which lifts and blesses and enhances; it is that Love which never gives up when the going gets tough.

It is that Love that we profess and show in the Church Family at St Nicholas.

O yes, our mothering may be a pale reflection of God's Love, but each of us can do something to make our world a kinder, holier, more dignified place.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister