

Hello, and welcome to this reflection for Sunday, the 14th of March. It's a day which has very many different names attached to it. It's the fourth Sunday in Lent, which means it's roughly halfway between Ash Wednesday and Easter Day. We're halfway through our Lenten journey. And that's why it's also called Refreshment Sunday. If you've given something up for this Lent or you're following a rigorous regime, then this is your opportunity to have a break, you can officially take a break on this day.

Through many centuries, the Church has also called it Mothering Sunday, recognising the habit people had of returning to their 'mother church' on this day, the place where they'd been baptised and which had nurtured their faith. Often those in domestic service returned to their home communities on this day. In more modern times, of course, for about the last 100 years, we've come to know it as Mothers' Day. Well, there's never been breakfast in bed for this mother on the fourth Sunday in Lent. But like most families, we enjoy remembering the mothers of every generation on this day. And the church recognises that in the readings that it sets for the day.

There's the story at the beginning of one Samuel chapter 1, verses 20 to 28. Hannah has waited long for a child. And like many women who found it hard to conceive she has a sense that her son Samuel is extra special. "For this child I prayed." Therefore, as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord. And then in John's gospel, chapter 19, verses 25 to 27, another story of motherhood, this time at the scene of Jesus's dying. So it's the parting between him and his mother. Mary also gives her son back to God. But this time, it's in grief and sorrow. Both these passages speak about the relationships of a mother and her children, what we know to be one of the most enduring forms of love.

As we have endured these long months of lockdown, and all the inhibitions that it's brought, it has surely been the loves in our life, which have helped us survive. And the separations from the people we love, which has caused us most pain. That mixture of the beauty and pain of love is at the heart of Ian McEwan's novel called "Enduring Love". I remember it vividly because it begins with a dramatic accident. But the cleverness of the novel lies in that phrase 'enduring love', and how it brings together two realities which we know so well. One is that love asks a lot of us. Part of the novel is about distorted, obsessive love, and the pain of distrust and suspicion. How do we endure love and the hardship it asks of us, such as Mary had to endure in watching her son Jesus fulfill his destiny, through suffering? But the other meaning of enduring love is about love which lasts. The novel opens with the scene of a couple, Joe and Clarissa, having a picnic celebrating the length and comforts of their relationship. Until that is, this accident and all its consequences take their toll on them. We know especially on this day, when we give thanks for mother love that love is what sustains us. But it is also capable of being complex and demanding and sometimes fragile.

In our times of need and endurance we return not just to human love, but to how God's love is poured into our hearts. Whatever we endure we still have hope. That hope is not in vain for the promise is that God's love is ever present. It is generously, daily, reliably made available to us, asking us in turn, to be faithful in our habits of love. When life is hard, when we feel lost, or we do something shameful, when we can't see the way ahead, or we're frightened by what's happening to us, the love of God still gets poured into our hearts, often through the people who will not let us go.

What do I feel about being a mother? A very strong sense for me, is that I always hope my children will know which way to turn if they get into trouble, or if their life feels as if it's falling apart. I hope that the love at home is the place our children will return when they need help, when they need to know that God's love is a place of home for them as well.

My closing illustration this week, is one of enduring love. It's not a famous person, but of a family, a family I know in the diocese, who are going through a terrifying time just now. The young mum in the family who has small children is almost certainly dying. This news has come upon them suddenly, and it feels like a complete upending of what ought to be. We might expect that the elderly grandparents of the family are coming towards the end of their life. But surely not a young mother? But it is her parents, who despite their grief and panic, are pouring out their practical love. It's they who are showing God's love poured into everyone's hearts in this tragic situation. They're travelling this rocky road with 'mother love'. The love which freely gives itself, which knows no bounds, and so shows that hope is not in vain.

I said this day, the fourth Sunday of Lent, has lots of different names. It's also called Laetare Sunday, laetare being the Latin word for rejoice, which begins some of the biblical passages associated with it. In the worship offered on this day, psalms and readings start with that invitation to us to rejoice whatever this day holds for you. May you know the gift of love in your life. May you practice the habit of loving and so may you rejoice in the love God has for you and which he so badly wants to pour into your heart.

Amen