

**21<sup>st</sup> March 2020**  
**Mothering Sunday, Lent 4,**  
**Day of prayer and action for churches in Britain and Ireland**

Colossians 3.12-17  
John 19.25b-27

This morning, we would normally be standing in a busy Cathedral, full of families, and getting ready to distribute flowers to celebrate Mothering Sunday. It is wonderful to be linked through our live stream, and I'm only sorry that we can't pass virtual flowers to you, through the screen.

Instead, here is an image of a flower for us to conjure up in our minds. It comes from a fifteenth century carol book, and it's written in Middle English, with a Norfolk dialect. It's become familiar to us from Christmas services, and it goes like this:

*There is no rose of such virtue  
As is the rose that bare Jesu...  
For in this rose contained was  
Heaven and earth in little space.*

The experience of carrying an unborn child is an extraordinary everyday miracle – in this little space grows a new, furred creature, containing already so much of his or her future life, appearance, and personality: small and hidden, yet infinitely precious. And the young woman whom this carol celebrates, Mary, who has the courage to say yes to the message of the angel, finds that, small and hidden, she carries heaven and earth.

As the baby she bore grows up, he embodies the truth of the everyday miracle that heaven is always seeking to be earthed. This is a truth which will lead him to overturn both tables and conventions, to reorder the understanding of the learned, and to raise up the outcast. This is a truth

which finds strength in weakness, blazes light into darkness, draws hope from pain. It is a truth which leads him to the ultimate intersection of heaven and earth, on the Cross. And it will lead his mother there too.

This is where we find her this morning, in our reading from John's gospel. On this middle Sunday of Lent, we are suddenly brought to the Passion of Christ. And she who contained heaven and earth in little space now stands and waits, as in the little space constructed from wood and nails, her son takes the world's weakness, the world's darkness, the world's pain, into his own body. In that particular time and place, he transforms all times and all places.

As self isolation and staying at home becomes a reality for many of us, we will have to get used to little spaces. It would not be surprising if we start to feel claustrophobic and hemmed in, downcast and stir-crazy. But Jesus and his mother are here to show us instead that a little space can become for us an everywhere. Because Christ, by breaking free from death, breaks all chains for us, wherever we find ourselves.

The mediaeval mystic, Mother Julian of Norwich, lived through two outbreaks of the Black Death, and herself became desperately ill with a different disease. On her recovery, she experienced visions – revelations of the love of God. In one of them, she describes how God showed her, 'a little thing, the quantity of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand. I looked upon it,' she says, 'with the eye of my understanding, and thought, "What may this be?" and it was answered... "It is all that is made." I marvelled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness, and I was answered in my understanding, "It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it..." In this little thing I saw three properties: the first that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it.'

This tiny, vulnerable thing, the sum total of all created matter, held in being by God, makes Julian realise our own vulnerability and need of God.

Through grace, she is enabled to see beyond what is created, to the Creator, in whom we find our rest. Even if creation feels as if it might collapse, we know that it will last because God loves it. Julian, echoing the words of the Letter to the Colossians, sees that 'God is everything that is good and supports us. He clothes us in his love, envelops us and embraces us. He wraps us round in his tender love and he will never abandon us.'

So from this little thing comes a recognition, both of the infinite and universal love of God, and also of his particular love for each one of us, which binds us together in the body of his Son.

This binding together is what happens even as Jesus suffers, as he creates a new community by entrusting his mother and his beloved disciple to each other. And this is what he does for us now, by blessing and redeeming all those places where we find ourselves, and by clothing us with his love, uniting us in his name across all barriers.

This Mothering Sunday, we give thanks for all those who have carried and nurtured us. All those who have gone with us through pain and joy. And all those who by being mothers to us, have shown us the love of God in Christ. As we pause in our Lenten disciplines and look forward, even in the midst of trouble, to Easter hope and joy, we are invited today to commit ourselves both to prayer and action, turning outwards to hold people and places before God, and to bring his compassion to others. And we are equipped to do just that. Because, as the mother of Jesus knew, if we have the courage to do God's will, heaven and earth will meet.

Amen.