

Mothering Sunday (Lent 4) - 2016.03.07

Mothering Sunday *Malcolm Guite*

At last, in spite of all, a recognition,
For those who loved and laboured for so long,
Who brought us, through that labour, to fruition
To flourish in the place where we belong.
A thanks to those who stayed and did the raising,
Who buckled down and did the work of two,
Whom governments have mocked instead of praising,
Who hid their heart-break and still struggled through,
The single mothers forced onto the edge
Whose work the world has overlooked, neglected,
Invisible to wealth and privilege,
But in whose lives the kingdom is reflected.
Now into Christ our mother church we bring them,
Who shares with them the birth-pangs of His Kingdom.

Perhaps it is appropriate, following Saturday's reflection on the fruition of earthly loves, that we come to Mothering Sunday!

For this fourth Sunday in Lent, sometimes known as Refreshment Sunday, is also celebrated as Mothering Sunday. As society has grown more secular Mothering Sunday has eventually become 'Mother's Day', but it is good to remember its rich roots and to see how the celebration of God's nurturing care for us, the nurture of our parents, and the church community as itself a place for nurturing and growth are all essentially linked together.

The idea of the Church herself as mother to us is very ancient, and may go back to Jesus' own comparison of himself to a mother hen in Matthew 23.37:

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!
How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her
brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*

Perhaps more telling still are the references to 'the birth-pangs of the kingdom'. That recognition that God himself knows both the pain and the fruitfulness of labour and birth seems to me an essential element in Christianity. Indeed there is a very striking passage in John's Gospel where Jesus asks the disciples to imagine that they themselves were pregnant and going through labour pains, and then that they have given birth, in order that they should understand both the time of trial that they will go through as his followers but also the fruitfulness of that discipleship for themselves and for the world:

When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (John 16.21-22)

This notion of both empathizing with the birth-pangs of others and sharing with God in the birth-pangs of others and sharing with God in the birth-pangs of the kingdom is something I particularly draw out at the end of today's poem.

Mothering Sunday is a festival that is still evolving: for me it seems a very good day to remember, pray for and support the many single parents in our society: the ones who have been abandoned or betrayed by their partner, the ones who have stayed to raise and care for children. So in my sonnet for this day of thanksgiving for all parents, especially for those who bore the fruitful pain of labour, I have particular praise for those heroic lone parents who for whatever reason have found themselves bearing the burdens on their own, sharing with no one the joys of parenthood. It's my prayer that the Church, the local Christian community, can become like a mother for those single parents and an extra parent for their children, so that they 'who have been in sorrow' may also 'rejoice with great joy'.

- Malcolm Guite, Chaplain of Girton College, Cambridge

www.kingschapel.ca

The Lenten Poetry is available on the website for the Parishes of Sackville and Dorchester at sackville-dorchester-anglican.org. Click on 'Worship' and then 'Lent'. Towards the bottom of the page you'll find 'Poetry'.