

Sermon preached at St Thomas Becket Hamburg, 6th March 2016

Those readings for today's service contain two fascinating stories, the first a very ancient one that the Jews over the centuries must have loved and must still love, as they hear it again and again. And the other one, one of the most superb stories that that master story-teller Jesus of Nazareth ever told, and in between those two stories, St Paul at his most exuberant, happy, positive and hopeful.

Let's begin with St Paul, after all, it is Refreshment Sunday, half way through the somber season of Lent. Today, we're to be refreshed, before moving on through to the ever darker account of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, then his Passion, and then Good Friday – before Easter can come, and the dawn of a new day, a new beginning, a new Creation, that only ever makes sense once the trauma of the Passion has happened first.

But today's a day of refreshment, on the way. So let's celebrate it, as Paul says, with gratitude in our hearts, with songs, and hymns, and spiritual songs – and then the bread and the wine, Tasters of the Feast that is to come.

Refreshment Sunday is also Mothering Sunday: the day on which according to the tradition, we should give thanks for our own mothers; that is something everyone can do, for everyone has a mother who brought him or her into the world, went through the painful processes of labour, the 'birth-pangs', the struggle, the release, - while we males of the species can only look on in helpless amazement and admiration. But all of us, male and female, can give thanks for the one who carried us for nine months in the womb, brought us into the world, and then in most – but sadly not all – cases nurtured us through our childhood. That's a lot to be thankful for. Let's celebrate that today, not least with flowers, to be given out at the end of the service.

I was hugely blessed by my mother; I had four sisters, two older, two younger, and, with the two closest to me in age, every evening our mother shared the Bible stories with us. And one of our favourites was the one we have just heard read: the birth of Moses, and the basket in the bulrushes.

Not that we – or at least I – realised the full significance of the story. What really interested me was how the basket was made, and more importantly, how it was made water-tight. After all, the reeds amongst which it was to be placed grew near the banks of the Nile, but presumably in the water – not far from where Pharaoh's daughter came down from her royal palace and used to plunge into the water and bathe. But it was **her** father, the great king Pharaoh, who had ordered all the new-born Hebrew boys to be thrown into the Nile and drowned. And here was his own daughter spotting the basket in the reeds, asking her attendants to see what or who was in it, coming to the conclusion that the baby lying there was a Hebrew boy, and yet she, the king's own daughter, was resolving to save it. She couldn't bear the thought of throwing him into the water as her father had decreed should happen...

And then comes that marvellous moment in the story, when the baby's older sister, presumably with her heart in her mouth, summoned up all her courage, came out into the open, went to Pharaoh's daughter and asked her if she should go and find someone who could nurture the child.

How the Jews would, down the centuries, have loved this story and revelled in the irony – the double irony - that the child should be saved by Pharaoh's own daughter and nurtured by its own Hebrew mother! And the Egyptians never knew! Nor could they have had any idea that it was this boy, brought up eventually by Pharaoh's own daughter, herself of course Egyptian through and through, who would lead the whole Hebrew people out of slavery and across the Red Sea. Little did Pharaoh's daughter know what she was doing, when she showed compassion on that totally vulnerable little figure lying in a wicker basket in the reeds.

But we can't leave this story on this Mothering Sunday in 2016 without dwelling for a moment on what that little boy's mother must have gone through. First of all, her love for her child, then her recognition that he'd got to be hidden if he was to escape drowning, then her anguish in not knowing what would happen to him, then having him given back to her to nurture by no less a celebrity than Pharaoh's own daughter, and then her anguish as she

had to hand him back again to Pharaoh, to be brought up as if he were an Egyptian. And beside her anguish, what must all that coming and going have done to his 'ethnic identity'?

And as the story of his life develops, Moses' identity does become more and more muddled and unclear. He becomes a refugee in a foreign land, he is mistaken for an Egyptian by the man who was about to become his father-in-law. He and his wife Zipporah have a child, and Moses calls him Gershom, which means an 'Alien', a foreigner, you might say: a refugee. And why does he call him that? Because he himself knew what it was to be a foreigner, a refugee, an alien.

It is such an ancient story, but it is so up-to-date, so topical. You can't reflect on it without the pictures of those children washed up drowned on the shores of the Mediterranean, the hordes of migrants trying to make their way across the borders of EU countries....And today, Mothering Sunday, we think of the anguish of the mothers, many taking part in the refugee marches themselves, some with babies to care for, some giving birth on the way, others waiting at home for news of their sons and daughters.

There is lots to pray for here, on Mothering Sunday this particular year. And pray too for those countries led by Germany and Sweden, struggling to cope with such a massive influx of people, while others, not least the U.K. stands by and watches, hiding behind agreements which were made in a different, more stable age where the disasters of the Middle East in 2015 and now 16 couldn't have been even dreamed of.

Thank God, that in **our faith**, the refugee, the alien, the outsider, have such an honoured place. But what a challenge that also gives us all, not least those of us who normally give in the U.K.

To turn to today's Gospel reading, Jesus' story of the so-called Prodigal Son, more accurately referred to as the story of the two brothers, like so many of Jesus' stories and actual encounters with people, also has within it the element of the stranger. In this case the younger son is one who has gone astray, forfeited his position at home,

makes a mess of his life in a foreign country far from home, and finds that no one will help him. **He** didn't leave home as a refugee because he had to, he left because he wanted to live it up, experience life, and (to use today's language) he messed up, big time.

And the heart of the story is the love of his father. His compassion outweighs everything else. He is waiting, waiting, waiting, for his stupid son to come back home (and doubtless his mother was waiting too, inside the home). And when he sees him in the distance – such a lovely detail, this – he runs out to meet him, flings his arms round him, kisses him, and without thinking of any possible repercussions elsewhere in his family – such is love's overriding priority – orders the fatted calf to be killed and a massive celebration to be prepared. Such is the love of the father for his son, however far he has strayed.

But that, understandably, is not how the elder son sees it. And here Jesus' psychological acumen shines out: the elder son is going to be outraged by his **father's** behaviour; his younger brother had also been expecting a very different kind of welcome from the one he received. He'd rehearsed what he was going to say again and again, as he plodded his way home: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired servants." Quite right too, the elder son would have thought. To lay on a party was outrageous, totally unjust, and a massive mistake. And yet that was what was going on: he could hear the sound of celebrating, merry-making, even of feasting – totally inappropriate. And in no uncertain terms he tells his father so.

And his father does his best, not really adequate, one has to say, to appease his elder son. But he had had his nose put out; he's been made a fool of, in front of the servants. In the end, all the father could do was plead with him to come and join the party.

And that is where the story ends, we don't know whether he did or he didn't: would he, as I believe the Germans say, "be able to jump over his own shadow"?

We'll never know; we're simply left with the question: what would **we** have done? Would we have been able to break out of our own preoccupation with our own worthiness, a worthiness which so often seems to go unrewarded, not even mentioned, absolutely taken for granted...? Or would we have "jumped over our own shadow" and joined the party, shared in the feast, in the celebration, that one who'd been lost was found, one who was thought to have died, come back to life?

The story ends with that question for all older, respectable, God-fearing people, who have always done what was asked of them – and a good deal more, if the truth be told – without so much as a word of appreciation.

It ends with the sound of celebration in the background – which is actually a celebration like that on which we are engaged – where those who come and join the feast are **sinners** who don't deserve it – come to find refreshment and new energy for the road that lies ahead, as we take to ourselves the bread and the wine, **tasters of the feast that is to come**, a celebration to which all are welcome, centred round the one who became sin on our behalf, and loved us, loved us all, to the end.

Amen

Rupert Hoare Mothering Sunday 2016