

## Mothering Sunday – sermon notes

We hope the notes below will give you some starting points for a message for Mother's Day – or indeed any other occasion! – with the aim of encouraging parents and all in the church to be thinking about how they can help to nurture faith in the hearts of children in their family or sphere of influence.

We've given some thoughts related to three of the readings which are often suggested for use on Mothering Sunday.

### Exodus 2:1-10

*Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman,<sup>2</sup> and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months.<sup>3</sup> But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile.<sup>4</sup> His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.*

*<sup>5</sup> Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it.*

*<sup>6</sup> She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said.*

*<sup>7</sup> Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?"*

*<sup>8</sup> "Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother. <sup>9</sup> Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. <sup>10</sup> When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, "I drew him out of the water."*

We can draw two key themes from this passage. The first is the idea of stewardship of children as opposed to ownership. As in the case of Hannah in 1 Samuel, the 'leading lady' in this passage forgoes her maternal rights, and commits her child to the care of God. This speaks of sacrifice, relinquishment and putting the child first.

The second theme is all about some of the defining characteristics of motherhood, and how they are expressed here by the various players in this drama. This leads naturally to consideration of the input of the wider family, and of course, to the role of 'mothers and fathers in the faith', in a fellowship or church setting.

### The context

These extraordinary events have their roots in an edict issued by Pharaoh, recorded in the preceding chapter. Alarmed by the explosive growth-rate of the Hebrew population, he orders their midwives to kill all male babies. But – claiming those babies always seem to be

born before they can attend – these God-fearing women do not carry out his instructions. The midwives are then blessed with families of their own, and Pharaoh commands that all male new-borns should be thrown into the Nile. This is the background for the remarkable events that follow.

### **Theme 1: Stewardship, not ownership**

The wife of a Levite falls pregnant, and gives birth to a son. Verse 2 tells us that, "When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months."

The maternal instinct is a beautiful and powerful thing – what mother doesn't think her child is a "fine child"?

But motherhood runs even deeper than that. It is frequently sacrificial. This woman faced a stark choice: she could continue to enjoy this "fine child" – until he was discovered and killed – or she could set him adrift on the river, and commit him to the care of the Lord. She chose the latter ... she chose stewardship over ownership. The woman was able to take the heartbreaking decision to entrust him to God, even in the face of her powerful maternal instincts. She did what was best for her boy, though it must have been so painful to let him go. The sacrificial love often shown by parents, in this case the mother, mirrors that exercised by our own heavenly Father.

**Application:** This mother had to entrust her child to the waves and into God's care in a very dramatic way at just three months old. As our children grow, how are we committing them into God's care, and preparing to increasingly 'let them go'? Are we taking the opportunities to nurture faith in the hearts of the children we know and love, while they are within our circle of influence?

### **Theme 2: Motherhood revealed**

This account says rather a lot about motherhood, but there is more to it than just the actions of this one Hebrew woman. Did not her daughter also demonstrate a quality of motherhood, when she watched over the infant Moses and secured his future? What about Pharaoh's own daughter, who was moved to compassion despite the edict of her father? And the midwives, of course, who risked so much to protect new-borns. Nurturing and protecting children – even under normal circumstances – so often transcends biological parenthood.

**Application:** In the church, the extended family of believers will always have opportunities to build up, encourage and bless – as mothers and fathers in the faith, not only in mentoring and encouraging children but in supporting their parents and carers. How could we do that more in the coming weeks and months?

## Luke 2:33–35

*The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. <sup>34</sup> Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, <sup>35</sup> so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."*

If they had been uttered in isolation, these words of Simeon might have broken the heart of this young mother, Mary. Her infant son – barely a week old – would be "a sign that will be spoken against". Not only that, Mary herself was irrevocably destined for some (as yet) unspecified tragedy – metaphorically, a sword would pierce her soul.

That sword found its mark at the crucifixion. The anguish of a mother, compelled by love to stay by her son as he is tortured to death, must be unimaginable.

But on this day, the baby Jesus was being presented at the temple, in accordance with Jewish law. And while this was a routine occurrence for families blessed with a male child, what happened in this instance was truly extraordinary.

### The context

In this chapter, Luke records the birth of Christ, and the subsequent visit of the shepherds – to whom Jesus had been supernaturally revealed as the Messiah. On the day set for the child's circumcision, a devout man named Simeon was prompted by the Holy Spirit to enter the temple courts. Simeon took the infant in his arms and declared, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." He then went on to speak about Jesus being a sign, and how Mary's soul would be pierced.

Shortly afterwards, a prophet called Anna came to the family, and spoke about Jesus to all who were awaiting the redemption of Israel.

### Theme 1: Faithfulness

Faithfulness runs like a golden thread through this chapter. The faithfulness of Simeon, who waited patiently for the revelation of God's son. Anna – widowed young, who spent the greater part of her 84 years worshipping God night and day, and in prayer and fasting. Joseph, of course: thrust unexpectedly into a 'blended family', he willingly became 'daddy' to the child who had no earthly father. And Mary, who saw her role through, from the joyous beginning to the gut-wrenching end. Mary, who knew there would one day be floods of tears, but embraced God's plan anyway.

Sometimes, mums know that bringing up their kids is going to be particularly challenging. They may be born with issues that make their care physically demanding, even exhausting. They might develop personality traits which make parenting difficult, or perhaps they

struggle in some other way. In a world where even the mother of the Messiah is not immune to grief, bringing up a child can be very tough indeed. That's why faithfulness is so important.

**Application:** Faithfulness doesn't guarantee our child will become a doctor, get a degree ... or even stay out of jail. But it does mean they get the best we can give them ... whatever the final outcome. Faithfulness works with what it's got. We may not have received a great example of parenting from our own parents; we may not have a lot to give our child. But success is that we love them, and that we faithfully do our best for them, with what we do have. The mother who goes without herself to feed her son, is just as much a good mother as the one who is able to buy her daughter an expensive education. Faithfulness in motherhood is deeply honourable, irrespective of personal circumstances, and no matter how the child responds. It is similar to the commitment God himself shows to his own children, and is also a hallmark of those who follow him.

As we admire the faithfulness of mums, we can also come alongside them to support them in their role, and to join in showing faithfulness to the children and young people we know. Everyone has a part to play and we can all have a positive input in someone else's life. We can become mothers and fathers in the faith – informally assisting in mentoring the young (or spiritually young) on their journey to spiritual maturity. The 'Sticky Faith' research stresses the importance of intergenerational relationships and has shown how each young person is greatly benefitted when surrounded by other adults who influence their faith. We can all become godparents, in the best sense of that word: as people who actively enrich and enhance the spiritual life of the young.

## **Theme 2: Affirmation and truth**

Luke's account of Christ's early days is notable for the interactions between Mary and others. Simeon of course, but also Anna, Elizabeth, the shepherds, and even the angel Gabriel. There were common features in all these encounters: they were orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, and they all provided Mary with both affirmation and truth.

Sometimes the truth of a situation can be hard to hear and hard to bear, such as Simeon telling her that her son would be "a sign that would be spoken against", and that her own soul would be pierced, as if with a sword.

But alongside the truth was precious affirmation, as Simeon recognised Jesus as the light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of God's people.

**Application:** The birth of Christ was a unique historical event, and it is little wonder that God gave Mary such encouragement through prophetic intervention. But just because modern mums haven't given birth to our Saviour, it doesn't mean they don't also need support, affirmation and truth. They need people to come alongside them, too. They need people who will connect with them, love them unconditionally and be someone they can rely upon ... someone they can turn to.

Mary's support came from those who were directly moved by the Holy Spirit. We should require no such prompting. As Christians, we are the hands and feet of Jesus – and we should be taking every opportunity to put love into action. And it goes beyond just support of the individual: every time we bless a mother, we are indirectly having a positive input into the lives of her children.

## Colossians 3:12–17

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup> And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*

*<sup>15</sup> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

This is a beautiful picture of both the character of the Christian, and of how that character is expressed relationally. And while these attributes should be found in anyone who follows Jesus, they are certainly relevant for those who are mothers, and all who care for children. Nowhere is it more important to reflect the nature of our saviour than on the home front.

There is obvious material for a sermon in such things as compassion, kindness and love. But alongside these, the Apostle Paul also speaks of forgiveness, recognising that we may be hurt or disappointed by others. It is pretty much inevitable that we'll sometimes be upset by our children, or others we love, and how we handle that is just as significant as how we relate to them the rest of the time.

Another theme we can pick up on is found in the second part of this passage. Paul talks about teaching and admonishing one another. Our first thought on reading these words is probably to apply that to a church context – but have we also thought about how these activities might occur in the home?

### The context

In the previous chapter, Paul is telling the Colossians what Jesus has accomplished for them, and how they should live in the freedom which that brings. In our passage, he builds on that – describing the impact Christ's accomplishments have on the character of those who follow him, and how that affects both attitudes and actions.

## **Theme 1: Christlike character, and Christlike actions**

Compassion, kindness and love are among those attributes of the Christian which we probably associate most strongly with motherhood. Mums are frequently 'gentle', too – and may even be patient. But even as Paul lists these things, he also speaks about forgiveness. He recognises that parenthood carries with it the inevitability of disappointment, hurt or anger. Kids will sometimes get it wrong ... just as we did.

Forgiveness leads towards peace, reconciliation, an end to resentment and all those other negative emotions. It is such a blessing – so liberating – that forgiveness could almost be seen as a selfish act. It heals our wounds, even if we are left with a scar.

The practicalities of forgiveness are always the same, whether our son has trashed the car while joyriding, our daughter has accidentally poisoned the goldfish because she thought they would appreciate some peanut butter, or a friend has said some hurtful words. We start by recognising the basic equality between them and us. We have all got it wrong at some point – we've all blown it. Then we apply the principle of divorce – we divorce the 'sinner' from their 'sin'. Why? Because Jesus did that for us!

Compassion, kindness and love are wonderful attributes. But perhaps it is only when we need to forgive that we can truly measure their impact on our lives.

**Application:** Be swift to forgive, and eager to restore. Remember that even if our child does something we would never have dreamt of, it is only a different manifestation of the same nature we find in ourselves. The seriousness of the offence doesn't alter our need to forgive – it only affects the level of release and freedom we feel when we let go of our hurt or our anger.

## **Theme 2: Living out our faith – a powerful witness to those around us**

Paul talks about teaching and admonishing one another: normal practice in church and also in the home. But he also says this: "Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another..."

Whatever we are teaching, it needs to be informed by our relationship with Jesus. Our kids should see that we are interacting with them in the context of our faith. In fact, this passage closes with these words, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him".

"Whatever you do ..." One of the key learning experiences for children in Christian homes is how their parents live out their faith. We can teach them scripture verses, biblical principles or anything else – but what often makes the biggest impact is when they see how we personally relate to God, how we live our whole lives "in the name of the Lord Jesus", seeking his guidance and bringing all our hopes, fears, joys and challenges to him as a natural part of everyday life. And of course this doesn't just apply to parents, but to all of us in our relationships with those who do not yet know God.

**Application:** “Teaching and admonishing” are important, but in our relationships with others, and with the children in our lives, we also have the opportunity to give them a window into our relationship with God and how that impacts our lives. And that doesn’t mean feeling the pressure to always be the ‘perfect witness’. We all fail and fall short, and that in itself can demonstrate the love and forgiveness of God towards us.



Inspire a faith that lasts

The **Kitchen Table Project** is a growing movement of mums, dads and carers joining together to support each other, learn from each other and share ideas, so we can all succeed in inspiring faith in our homes.

Visit [kitchentable.org.uk/church](http://kitchentable.org.uk/church) for lots more resources and ideas for leaders. Sign up at [kitchentable.org.uk/join](http://kitchentable.org.uk/join) to receive a monthly email of encouragement, inspiration and ideas for parents and churches too, and follow us on Facebook for daily ideas and inspiration [@ktpcampaign](https://www.facebook.com/ktpcampaign).



The Kitchen Table Project is an initiative from Care for the Family, which has been working to strengthen family life since 1988. Our aim is to promote strong family relationships and to help those who face family difficulties.

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