

Our Mother the Church

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God of compassion,
whose Son Jesus Christ, the child of Mary,
shared the life of a home in Nazareth,
and on the cross drew the whole human family to himself;
strengthen us in our daily living
that in joy and in sorrow
we may know the power of your presence
to bind together and to heal.

My text today is from John chapter 19 and verse 27, the words of Christ to the beloved disciple, informing John of his new duty of care for the Blessed Virgin Mary: 'Here is your mother'.

Mothering Sunday is the fourth Sunday in Lent – a feast day in Lent – Refreshment Sunday when servants used to be allowed home for a holiday to see their families. The commercialisation of Mothers' Day is a relatively modern phenomenon as is the notion of setting aside a day especially to honour our mothers.

This is the fifth Mothering Sunday that I have been with you and one of the challenges for a preacher is to say something new to his congregation about perennial themes. In the past, I have preached to you on the virtues of mothers in general; on the mother of Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary in particular; on parents

of both sexes. But today, I should like to focus our attention on our Mother the Church.

The word 'Church' has a number of meanings. It can mean a building, a place of worship like our own Church of St Bartholomew, Dinard. It can mean the people attending that church, the congregation, the parishioners – in this sense 'Church' means the people of God. It can mean the Church as a whole, the communion of the people of God under the umbrella organisation of the Church, for example the Anglican Church.

When we consider the image of Mother Church, all three understandings of the word 'Church' are in play. As a body, the Anglican Communion is central in interpreting the authority of the Bible and our Tradition and of rationally applying that understanding to our everyday, contemporary lives. In this sense, the Church is the Guardian of the Faith and a key Arbiter of Moral Thought. As a gathering of individuals, the 'Church' is our family, our kin, who with kindness can encourage and support us by providing the human face of God to us, the Children of God. As a building, the Church of St Bartholomew's provides a venue for us to meet, a place where we can worship God in prayer and praise and encounter him in the mystery of the bread and the wine of the Eucharist.

Fine – all well and good – but is the image of a mother a good way to describe the Church? I think so. I think so because of two essential qualities associated with motherhood: to be life-giving and to be nurturing. A mother gives us life by a long process which begins with the act of conception; a mother sustains us by

giving us food and drink; clothes to wear and a home in which to live; embracing us with her unqualified love. The Church is the same. Firstly, the Church is life-giving: I took my faith seriously through the kind concern of two friends who took me to a church where the gospel was presented in such a way that I wanted to be a part of the vision and values of which they spoke. Secondly, the Church nurtures life. By becoming a member of St Paul's Church East Ham, my young faith was fed and grew as I responded to my vocation by teaching in Sunday School, training to be a Reader and then offering myself to be a clergyman. It is by being your priest at St Bartholomew's that I experience the love of God and try to channel that love as I try to help feed you spiritually and as I in turn am fed.

So this Mothering Sunday, it is right, meet and right, to honour our mothers but in doing so, let us not forget that other mother to whom we owe a great debt of gratitude, our Mother the Church who has withstood the test of time to nurture and sustain the life she has given us.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
St Bartholomew's, Dinard
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H: Sermon 23: Mother Church

