

## **A Sermon for Lent 3: Mothering Sunday**

**Readings: Exodus 2:1-10; Luke 2:33-35**

“His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.”

*Ex 2:4*

### **His sister stood at a distance.**

We've come to the end of what, for many of us and for our nation, is one of the strangest and most disturbing weeks we've ever known.

Today, many people would normally be celebrating Mothering Sunday in the company of loved-ones; instead two new phrases have been etched on our minds: social distancing and self-isolation; and the Prime Minister has warned us to stay away from each other.

Many of us have entered into a period of solitude, loneliness and uncertainty unlike anything we have known before.

If we're still working, it's often from home. People who can't shop online dash in and out of shops; self-service checkouts are popular like never before; pubs and restaurants have become the new grocery stores – replacing a little of their usual bar takings and meeting the needs of many who suddenly can't buy the food they need or can't risk standing in line in the supermarket.

Many people wonder how they will survive the next few months financially; some people wonder if they will survive at all.

It's been a particularly cruel week for people who recently lost loved ones, who hoped to arrange a decent funeral as public worship in church was banned, then strict rules for funerals elsewhere were published.

Suddenly, it feels very difficult to give your beloved father, husband, son, wife, mother, daughter, the send-off they deserved.

Most of your family and all of your friends have to stay away; even close family are asked to stand at a distance; who, then can hold you in your grief?

At exactly the time when a grieving man or woman needs family around them, their kids can no longer fly home; they're told not to have friends or family come round and, even, they shouldn't even be within 2 metres of somebody else. Let alone having help to clear a small room where the beloved so recently lay. It is grievous, almost beyond belief.

We all stand at a new distance. A distance from one another, and from the world we once knew.

Society seems to have woken up to the fact that there are vulnerable people living among us, people who see nobody from day to day except, perhaps, a paid carer in the morning and evening; a relative a few times a week; perhaps not even that.

People who never get out; who already watch the world from a distance.

And, perhaps, we glimpse how easy it is for all of us to be that person.

And, perhaps, that seeing is not such a bad thing. Perhaps it will help us change for the better, during this crisis, and afterwards.

But parish communities have always known these things. We try to keep in touch with those who can no longer come to church, who's faces are no longer seen in the anonymity of the supermarket, who might be hazily remembered as 'o yes, that old man who used to sit over there and take ages over a pot of tea for one'.

Some parishes are better at it than others, but we know that we have a calling to try. To seek out the lost sheep rather than sit comfortably in the company of the crowd. To reach out to Peter and prevent him from sinking.

To stand alongside, to go the extra mile, feed the hungry, tend the sick, bind up the broken hearted; in all these things, to declare the endless love of the Lord for those whom the world has forgotten.

These are the things that Mary's son taught, before the sword of loss pierced his Mother's side as the soldier's spear pierced her boy.

Even though we stand at a distance, we can find practical ways to draw close. And even if we are alone, and if we don't have the technology that other people have for speaking at a distance (isn't that what the word 'telephone' means?) we are united in having one thing we all can do; one

thing in which, we all draw close to One who is three persons, who will never desert us, who holds us even when we find nothing to hold on to.

We can pray. For our world, our nation, our neighbours and ourselves. We can pray a list of petitions or we can pray with no words at all. We can do it if we're immobile and we can do it on a ten mile run.

We can, we should, pray with the whole nation tonight by lighting a candle at 7.00pm and placing it in our window as a sign of hope. If you're on Facebook, you will be able to join Rosemary as she does the same here in church.

You don't have to be a Christian to give prayer a go. But the funny thing about it is that, when we start to pray regularly, we begin to become the answer to other people's prayers.

We can make happen, for our communities, the things for *which* we pray. Even if we must stand at a distance as we do so.

Which brings us to the Old Testament reading set for today, where we discover a people and a family in crisis.

Moses is cast adrift by his grieving mother, who does so in order to save his life. Isolated from his family and his people, just as she isolates herself from him for his own good, he finds mercy in an unexpected quarter.

Meanwhile, a vigilant sister, watching from a distance, courageously and imaginatively brings Mother and son together again in a re-shaped relationship. It is far from ideal, but it is better than it could have been.

It is, perhaps, a parable for our time.

Moses' sister is the prophetess Miriam, whose name may mean, among other things, 'Bitter Waters' - and Miriam often becomes 'Mary' in English. Think and pray on these things as we navigate the strange waters of this springtime and Lent.

Because our world is changing day by day, but our hope is eternal.

It is not going to be easy. For many, it will be exceptionally hard.

It was so, for Moses' unnamed mother, for Miriam and later for Mary. But all three acted with courage despite their fear and difficulty. They did more than simply survive or get through: they changed the future.

So let's not stand at a distance, except in inches and centimetres. Let's come close to each other in our need, as we look for, and even celebrate, new ways of being neighbours and community.

"His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.