



## La Côte Anglican Church

Fourth Sunday in Lent – Sermon from Clare Amos  
10 March 2024 – Holy Communion in Divonne

This Sunday in our worship today we are celebrating what is called ‘Mothering Sunday’ a festival which may be new to some of you, for in France and Switzerland – as well as in many other parts of the world, it is more usual to keep Mother’s Day in May.

However unlike Mother’s Day, which these days is very much seen as a secular festival, Mothering Sunday, still widely celebrated in the United Kingdom and the Church of England, has its origins in religious tradition.

One of the readings that was, for several centuries, used regularly in Anglican worship on the fourth Sunday of Lent – which is where we are today in the church’s calendar, a reading from Paul’s letter to the Galatians, refers to ‘the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is the mother of us all’.

On the basis of this verse there sprung up a tradition that on this day people would travel to their ‘mother church’. In some cases that was the church where they were originally baptised, in other cases it was the cathedral as the ‘mother church of the diocese. For most of us here in Divonne today neither of these options is realistic – certainly not for me as I was born in Gloucestershire, a place that I left at the age of 2.

But by the 19<sup>th</sup> century the tradition had developed. In that period many young people were what was known as ‘in service’ working away from home for long periods as domestic servants. It became the practice that on Mothering Sunday they were given a holiday to return home and see their mothers, bringing presents, and perhaps even a simnel cake, special Mothering Sunday fare. Our 21<sup>st</sup> century keeping of Mothering Sunday has its roots in this practice.

One reason that I particularly appreciate keeping Mothering Sunday in March is that some years this means it happens very close in time – or even on the actual date of March 25, the day when we celebrate the news brought to Mary by the angel Gabriel that she was to be the ‘mother’ of Jesus. It feels fitting as our Gospel reading has done, to set the remembrance of our own mothers alongside reflecting on what it must have felt for Mary to be the mother of Jesus.

Alan: Mothers!

Clare: Mothers!

Alan: What have they ever done for you!

Clare: What have they ever done for you!

Alan: Who would have one?

Clare: Well, actually everyone – none of us would be here if we hadn't had at least a biological mother.

Alan: What would you want to say about your mother?

Clare: What would you want to say about yours?

Alan: You first, what would you want to share? What do you most remember about your mother?

Clare: Well actually one thing that I remember about my mother was how close she was to her own mother, my grandmother. My granny died when she was comparatively young, just over 60, and I was 10, and I remember how upset my mother was over her death. My mother wasn't a bursting into tears sort of person, but I do remember how on several occasions in the months after granny died I would find her weeping at places and times where she didn't think people would see her.

I guess I would say that my mother wasn't a particularly cuddly sort of person either, though she clearly cared for both my sister and myself and wanted the best for us. Her own early life had been marked out by difficulties: though she was very bright and was doing well academically and had hoped to go to university, for family reasons she had had to leave school suddenly when the Second World War broke out in 1939. Though later on she trained as a teacher – and in fact worked as a teacher for many many years, she was always determined that my sister and I should have the chances that had been denied her. She encouraged us, perhaps at points even over-pushed us, to achieve at school, was determined that we would go to university and then to take our own careers seriously. She wasn't a person who particularly liked labels, but looking back – by the standards of her time she was certainly a feminist. She certainly didn't believe in assuming that her husband should have the responsibility for all the financial matters in the family, and that assumption has rubbed off on both my sister and myself. I suspect that at times her and my father's relationship had its strains, but there was a deep affection between them, perhaps particularly from my father's side. One thing that I didn't know for years, in fact until about 20 years ago, was that Mum had originally been engaged to another man, Stanley, before she met my father. Stanley was a pilot in the Second World War, and like all too many young pilots of the time was killed when his plane came down. Apparently Dad, my father, also a pilot, was a friend of Stanley's, and met and initially got to know my mother, when he came to bring condolences to Mum over Stanley's death. Mum, I think, tried to bury her grief for Stanley, feeling that it was

the only way to get through things and on with life – as many people did at that time. It was Dad rather than Mum who eventually told me the story of Stanley: I think one of its effects was that Mum found it very difficult to display emotions, which probably wasn't always good for her – and perhaps sometimes not for us.

Now over to you: what do you want to say about your mother?

I can't think of my mother without thinking of my father, who liked to be in control and to be seen to be in control, but was not always terribly good at it. Being born in 1901, he represented the generation he belonged to. On the other hand my mother was good at picking up the pieces when things went wrong, particularly caring for my schooling and education. I received many gifts from my parents, but the most important to me are music, which I received from my father, and valuing the beauty of flowers and floral art, that I received from my mother. She found her love of flowers and floral decoration created a kind of personal island for her within her marriage, and she became a widely-respected teacher of floral decoration later in her life. I remember watching her keenly as she went about arranging flowers, and from her I picked up something of the art myself. So now when I go into a church and see flowers beautifully arranged, I find myself thinking of her, as if she is standing beside me, and feeling the way she would have responded to what I am looking at. And on Mothers Day, the flowers speak to me particularly of her, as well as of all other mothers and all other nature-lovers.

Clare... Of course, since we are married to each other and we both had mothers, we also both had mothers-in-law. But perhaps we won't get into mothers-in-law today. Instead...

Alan: Let's turn to think about Jesus and his mother. What might Jesus have said if he had been asked to answer that question that we have been exploring. What might Jesus have said about his own mother?

Clare: Perhaps it is worth remembering that the name 'Mary' is a form of the Hebrew name Miriam, the sister of Moses who helped to rescue him as a baby and then sang in celebration as the people escaped from slavery at the Red Sea. As the litany we are going to use shortly suggests, Mary, mother of Jesus, stands in a line with several of the great women who left their mark in the pages of the Bible. I wonder if Jesus saw her in those terms?

Alan: I wonder too when Jesus learned about the remarkable stories of his own birth? The Gospels hint, but they don't go into detail, about the difficulties and challenges that Mary faced: that extraordinary annunciation by the angel before she was married to Joseph, Joseph's reactions, and then the long journeys that she had to go through while pregnant and with a newborn.

Clare: Our Gospel reading today speaks of how in the Temple Simeon warned Mary that Jesus' eventual destiny would lead to her heart being pierced with grief. All those strange happenings – mingling together joy and sorrow around the time of Jesus' birth. I cherish the repeated comment in Luke 2, that Mary 'treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart'. I wonder how much of that pondering she shared with Jesus himself?

Alan: There are a few hints in the Gospels that, at least when Jesus began his ministry, there was a fair amount of tension between him and Mary. Can't have been easy for her when she and his brothers tried to get to see him and he told people that everyone who did the will of God counted as his mother and his brothers. Must have felt like a slap in the face. Or that time at the wedding when Mary encouraged him to help out, and his initial response at least was to tell her to let him alone. Though it is interesting that she persevered and eventually he did what she had suggested.

Clare: Mary was of course with Jesus at that last moment of his life, when he hung on the cross. I wonder what she felt like then? How it must have felt a dreadful fulfilment of Simeon's words about a sword piercing her heart!

Alan: And yet we are told that even in the middle of his suffering on the Cross, Jesus cared for his mother and her welfare and that of his faithful disciple John. He entrusted them to the care of each other. That was a beautiful thing to do. Entrusting one person whom you love to the care of another whom you love. John was to take the place of Jesus as the son of Mary; and she was to be his mother; and so as he left his earthly life, Jesus looked down with love and with forgiveness on those who were surrounding him. He gave of himself to others until his last breath.

Clare: Three pictures and a song – which sum up what we have been trying to share about Mary – and about mothers. Michaelangelo's famous Pieta in Rome, showing Mary holding Jesus in her arms suffering with him in his dreadful crucifixion; The Dancing Madonna, sculpted on the wall of a church in the English Midlands, showing Mary's joy in the infant Jesus; the Walking Madonna, outside Salisbury Cathedral showing a determined older woman. Three different faces of Mary, three different faces of motherhood.