

The hymn we sang before the Gospel today based on Psalm 34 is one of my favourites – though it is not one I have sung very often

*Through all the changing scenes of life,
in trouble and in joy,
the praises of my God shall still
my heart and tongue employ.*

It is a wonderful anthem which invites us to remember the power of our voice to both praise and bring about change – and to dare to praise God in all that we face – not always an easy thing to do!

The fourth Sunday of Lent, which historically is also kept as mothering Sunday is a great tribute to this hymn – it is a day of thanksgiving. A day when we give thanks for our Lenten journey so far and we take a little respite or refreshment. It is also day when we give thanks for ‘Mother Church’ and the life of our parish and all that means for us. The Hymn we sing reminds us that we give thanks for the gifts we have, for what is before us, and for what we have endured – as well as to sing out for the truths which we have in God, and that God’s justice reveals to us.

On Mothering Sunday we also give thanks for the gift of Motherhood; for many of us this too is a time of thanksgiving, but it will also bring up memories of things that have past, and are no more, and maybe of what we wish could have been. This mothering Sunday will be particularly hard for many, but we should not shrink from celebrating it because of that – rather we are invited to be thankful and generous is praise all the more!

A day of thanksgiving can often be a challenge because in any single moment we have things which cause us pain and upset, as much as things for which we are thankful. The gift of the psalms is that we bring all that we are, our cries and our praise to God. We speak out about what we see, hear and fear, and we do not shy away from what is difficult.

This week, like most weeks we have experienced things and heard stories of events which show both the best and the worst of humanity. I have loved this week hearing every day the squeals of delight from children in the school playground next door. I have enjoyed hearing how young people have embraced the wonder of learning, and the resilience of so many who have made this all possible. So much of the sounds I have heard this week were the music of hope – and yet with this backdrop there has been news of death, pain and hardship. There are many whose cries have not been heard, who have been silenced and excluded; even more so as we continue in lockdown – where then does our song of praise fit?

But we are not the first people who have had to find how to praise in the face of pain and hardship; nor recognise that there are many who have no voice. The reading we hear from Exodus today takes place against the backdrop of the systematic mistreatment of the Hebrews by Pharaoh which escalates from enslavement (1:11,

13) to ethnic cleansing as Pharaoh commands that the Hebrew boys be killed at birth (verse 16) or drowned in the Nile (verse 22). While we have not heard the proceeding verses, the desperation which leads a mother to leave her new born baby in the bulrushes gives us a keen insight into the kind of psychology of hate that, driven by fear, can move whole societies to engage in genocidal acts.¹

The story of Moses emerges out of this backdrop of hatred and pain. Fear is possessing a whole generation and yet they have not lost their faith that God will bring liberation. Moses mother places her son in a basket in the hope that it will save his life. Her action is her voice. It is an act of desperation and I suspect one few of us will ever understand because thankfully we will not have to have faced a situation where we have had to give up such a precious gift in the hope of their survival – but sadly it is a situation which thousands of mothers, and fathers and leaders have had to face – not just in history but now.

Our Gospel reading too holds up to us the same dilemma. In the moment when Mary should be filled with joy, at that moment when she brings her first born son to give thanks to God for his birth, a prophet speaks out. Not only proclaiming the joy and thanksgiving to God for this child who is the Messiah but also warning Mary that this joy will also in time bring to her much pain *'And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, '..... – and a sword will pierce your own soul too².'*

In the midst of the praise of God, the shadow of what is to come is present; and sometimes in the shadows – our praise of God is present and sustains us for what is to come. As Paul reminds us in second Corinthians on this Mothering Sunday *Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation³.*

I have thought about this a lot this week, as I have listened to the news, as I have spoken with people who feel they are silenced, as I have listened to others talk of their mothers, as we plan for the future of the parish moving forward, as we dare to hope we have worship together in person again.

It was a challenging year in the life of our community, and for the whole world. On Mothering Sunday last year, we were asked to not visit our mothers, all churches were closed for worship but open for private prayer. I went with Alice to Christ Church, where I was sworn in by the Bishop as their Priest in Charge. I remember then returning to sit in the sun in the car park chatting to people as they came to pray, and being taught 'at home' exercises by Patrick Haggard. Within a week of that day we were totally locked down with no access to churches. What a year it has been since then – what a journey we have been on!

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=972

² Luke 2: 33-34

³ 2 Corinthians 1: 7

There is much to lament from the last year, as well as much to praise God for, and sometimes it is hard to know which of these things is dominate – and yet maybe the vignettes the lectionary gives us today help us with this. Two women, two mothers, presented with unbearable choices, knowing that their children were at risk, both of whom chose to trust in God and praise, and in doing so find consolation. Two woman who lived in societies where they had few choices, and were often silenced; made choices which changed history.

At the heart of our journey of faith, whether in Lent or not, is prayer and justice. Our conversation with God which invites us to listen as well as speak. The yearning for God which sings within us, in the days of challenge, and in our voice of praise.

On this Mothering Sunday, despite all that we hold as lament as a community we still have much to praise God for. For God is our constant and our comfort, as God was for the mother of Moses and for Mary. As we celebrate this day, May the mind of God continue to dwell in us, embrace us and comfort us – and most of all inspire us to continue to sing God's praise and speak out in hope. Amen.