

## **Sermon 30/03/25 Together**

On Wednesday the reading in our 'Living Hope' booklets was about Job's friends who when he was in deep distress sat with him. That's all they just sat with him. They knew that there was nothing they could actually do to help, so they were simply there. I suspect you are now thinking that as someone who has frequent diary malfunctions I have forgotten that it is Mothering Sunday. It's ok. I haven't. But when you think about it that is how the mother child relationship starts. Just the two of them. A baby who may cry in deep and unfathomable distress, and a mother whose presence can sooth.

By the time we are toddlers we have an awareness of family, and of our place within it. Whether that is as the last and least, or as the king pin. There is some sort of structure and roles within it. Mothers even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century usually take the lead in caring and generally keeping the show on the road. It is this central role within the family that is being celebrated today with burnt breakfasts, huge bouquets, and chocolates given in the hope of sharing later. It is good to celebrate. Just as it is good to remember that it is not a good day for everyone. Not everyone will get to see their mother today, not all women will be with their children. People are separated by oceans, quarrels, death and poverty. We are familiar with the story of Hannah, desperate for a child, praying at the temple, and finally when Samuel was born giving him back to God as soon as he was weaned. Her celebration of the goodness of God's grace.

Traditionalists may point out that Mothering Sunday is not all about treating mothers. It was the day on which live-in servants were allowed to visit their homes, to worship at their mother church, a gathering not of biological family but of community, a chance to celebrate together the church, the family and the arrival of spring. A gathering together of people known, familiar and trusted.

I know that I am not the only person here taught to read with the Janet and John books, that stereotypical family unit, where the children were untypically helpful, and the parents never rushed or abrupt. Luckily, we all know that neither families nor churches are that idyllic. Our very existence is messy, relationships are complex, expectations can be unrealistic, and time and money in short supply. We know that it is only through God's grace that we muddle through the pitfalls of working together both as family and as church. If you missed the Lent Conversations this week you also missed a brilliant little video illustrating St Paul's vision of the body of the church. Initially we saw a big church building, then its whole congregation. But then the video zoomed in on specific people who had specific roles likening them to the different parts of the body, for example the youth worker who is an arm as he seeks to draw young people in. But I was most struck by the man described as, 'first to arrive and last to leave'. This was not about some fancy title but about his service to that community, his contribution to together.

Over the last few months we have seen here in Shirley Parish what together can achieve. People have talked with architects, the diocese, held coffee mornings, cleared dust, brought drinks to the builders and as a result we now have the pod, with a toilet in St James. It may seem a small thing in one sense, but it enhances the quality of the welcome we can give especially to congregations at baptisms, weddings and funerals who may have travelled some distance. And thinking of the communal effort that achieved this I need to mention the children at St James' school whose funrun made a significant contribution to this. The children see it as their church and feel part of the parish community. The 100 year celebrations at St Johns will see us together again.

In today's gospel reading we hear Jesus' instruction to his friends, at the last supper. He clarifies this. They are his friends, not his servants. As friends they are privy to his thoughts and his business, and they should show love to each other. They are together except for Judas who has left. We are familiar with the Easter story, we know that shortly after he said this Jesus went to pray in a garden, he was disappointed that his friends fell asleep, he was arrested, he was disappointed that his friends deserted him. As a five year old our granddaughter could not understand this, 'How could they be his real friends if they left him?'. She kept asking me. It's a hard one to answer. Real friends in the way that Jesus is a friend to us, do not leave us, but stay through the bad times as well as the good. They stay together.

Our hope for the future is that with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can continue to work together as a parish, showing friendship to each, friendship to strangers, welcoming people in our buildings and at the bus stop, sharing the Easter story with others who have never heard it, or only in a distorted way. It won't be easy. Sometimes there will be a need for action as with building the pod in St James, sometimes a need for contemplation, making a space for God to let us know what we truly need to be doing. Which sort of brings me back to Job and his friends. The call to action can feel very strong, a need to know all the details of someone's anxiety in order to support them can feel paramount, but that isn't true, as Jesus sits alongside us we can sit alongside others, conscious of their pain without sharing the details with others. A mother with an unsettled baby may not know what is troubling it, but can soothe her child with only a gentle rocking. Together with Jesus we can do that for others.