

Some of you may have noticed that when it's my turn to preach I like to dig around and find out what's behind the readings or the occasion, and then I can't resist telling you what I've found. It was an additional challenge when I heard Richard Harries say on 'Thought for the Day' that the origins of Mothering Sunday were 'confused'. There's nothing quite like a good confusion. So I started digging, and excavated what you might describe as some 'fun facts' – we'll get to those in a moment or two.

Chronologically, this is the Fourth Sunday in Lent. Conventionally, it is Mothering Sunday. Obscurely, it has also been known as 'Laetare Sunday' or 'Refreshment Sunday' – the latter because one was allowed to break the Lenten fast on the middle Sunday in Lent. So, first fun fact and specially for the grown-ups, if you want a gin and tonic or a glass of wine today, that is officially permitted. Gin used to be called 'Mother's ruin', but that wasn't a specific connection only with the fourth Sunday in Lent.

The connection with mothers and mothering can be traced back as far as the eighth century, by which time the set readings for the day's service included a reference to 'Jerusalem which is the mother of us all', and the first verse of Psalm 122 was 'I was glad when they said unto me: we will go into the house of the Lord'. It was a logical development to adapt this for local use, and a custom grew up of having a procession from your town or village to the 'mother church', which was the cathedral if it was close enough, or an abbey or minster church, or the largest church in the area. These processions were elaborate affairs. Every local congregation would come with its banners, and matters could get quite lively. Robert Grosseteste, who was Bishop of Lincoln, got very annoyed about this. (Second fun fact – and this one is definitely for anyone with a juvenile mind – Grosseteste means Big-head.) Bishop Big-head wrote a letter to the vicars in Lincolnshire in about 1250, in which he said: 'In each and every church you should strictly prohibit one church from fighting with another over whose banners should come first in processions at the time of the annual visitation and veneration of the mother church'.

Which would have been the medieval equivalent of St Peter's people having a punch-up with the good folk of St Barnabas and St Stephen's over which of us get to march into Christ the Saviour church first. Perhaps it's a good thing that the Walk of Witness has lots of stewards.

The custom continued after the Reformation, although the processions had stopped (processions smacked of popery, and the brand-new Church of England wasn't having any of that). You could go back to the church where you had been baptised, or your parish church, or the nearest cathedral. If you did, you were said to have 'gone mothering'. The Book of Common Prayer kept the 'Jerusalem, mother of us all' reading and Psalm 122, and the gospel was the Feeding of the Five Thousand, with the story of the generous gift of food for everyone. It's a great pity that Common Worship has abandoned these readings because they are the link to the original tradition, which has everything to do with the church and nothing at all to do with mothers.

Somewhere in the seventeenth century the custom developed that young people who worked away from home (as servants or apprentices) would be given this day as a holiday to go and visit their mothers. Which was fun for them, although as it was often the only holiday they got we probably think it was pretty tough. Given that most people didn't move around much, such a visit could very well also have included going to the church where they had been baptised. If they could, they would take a gift of food – often a simnel cake – and pick spring flowers along the way. So we can see how the original 'visit to mother church' gradually got tied up with bringing Mum flowers and (eventually) taking her out to lunch.

Nowadays most people have forgotten the 'mother church' aspect, but today's first reading is a useful reminder. God had heard Hannah's prayers for a child, and so when he was barely a toddler she took her son Samuel and gave him back to God by leaving him with the priests to become a servant in the temple. We wouldn't do this today, and if anyone tried they would get into serious trouble. But it has been a long tradition in many religions to put very young children into religious service. Not only was this a pious and praiseworthy act, but in times when families were large and food could be scarce it was a very practical one. The children would be housed, fed and given an education; in effect the church or monastery or convent would mother them.

Which demonstrates that mothering isn't strictly confined to mothers, or even to women. They are not the only people who care for us, cook and clean for us, notice when we need new clothes or a hug or an ear to bend, nudge us into understanding what's right and what isn't, help us through homework, and listen to the trials of our early teenage years. (By the time we get to our later teenage years we'd probably die rather than tell mum about some of the stuff that's going on.) They watch us leave and welcome us back, and not much later on they are where we turn when we are confronted with the realities of a family of our own. Grandmothers and aunts, godparents, older sisters, teachers, all do this too – in some circumstances they do it to an enormous extent, and so do men. And so does the church. Your mother church welcomes and accepts you, whoever you are and whatever is going on in your life. If you allow it, it will help you through difficulties, comfort you, challenge you and rejoice with you when life is good. Above all, it offers you the love of God, the fellowship of Jesus and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God as mother – providing, nurturing, forgiving and encouraging - is as important as God as father, even if we don't talk so much about it. So today, just as we celebrate the people who have mothered us, so we also celebrate the church which roots us in love, meets us in life and leads us to salvation.

And if you take nothing else from today, do remember that Mum and Dad can have a drink if they want to, that once there was a Bishop Bighead, and that congregations used to fight each other about which of them went into church first.