

MOTHERS' UNION FESTIVAL SERVICE: 14 JUNE 2016

A celebration of faith

When my husband was vicar of a central London parish, we had a parishioner who had been born during the First World War to parents who, as she put it, “were too young to know better”. She was brought up by foster parents, and was forever grateful to them for “doing their best”, but it left her with a lifelong sense of what “family” represented, and of the hole it might fill in people’s lives. She became a Church Army sister and devoted the whole of her long life to creating “family” for other people: for many years, running a hostel for homeless women, many of whom were struggling with addictions; with a few years off in the middle, working in the women’s section of Strangeways prison in Manchester.

I knew of her, but had never met her until, just after our first child was born, I bumped into her by chance. “I’ve been thinking about you,” she said. “With the new baby, I wondered if you’d like me to come and ‘do’ for you.” Long since retired, she still volunteered at a drop-in centre (where most of the clients were considerably younger than she was) and at a local community centre. That left her with one “free” morning a week, which she thought she might spend cleaning the downstairs of the vicarage, to take some pressure off a new mother and baby.

Although neither a mother herself, nor a member of the Mothers’ Union, she was a living example of the sort of love

and faith in action that the MU provides – in hospitals, and prisons, and communities, not just in this great city of London but across the globe.

And she knew that mothering is hard. It may be both the best and the most rewarding job in the world, but it's also relentless and exhausting, whether or not you're trying to juggle other work around it; and it's especially hard if you haven't got support, family or otherwise.

This is what Mary Sumner remembered when her own daughter gave birth, 140 years ago, and she called a meeting of local mothers – of all social classes -- to offer mutual support. I love the story that, although the first meeting was held in their rectory, Sumner was so overcome by nervousness that her husband had to speak for her and invite the women to return the following week. By the second meeting, happily, she had gathered enough courage to speak for herself, and the Mothers' Union was the result.

Nothing in my own life has done more to convince me of the existence of God than my experience of being a mother – not only because of the sheer, overwhelming sense of children being a blessing beyond any imagining, but also because loving our children can give us a tiny glimpse of God's love for us.

When our eldest was very small, he stamped his foot one day and said accusingly: "Your behaviour is making me very naughty." Whilst it clearly wasn't quite as sophisticated a

concept as it sounds, it certainly contained more than a grain of truth. Of course, parental love inevitably falls far short of the divine example, but it helps us to understand a love that's infinite and unconditional: a love that doesn't make demands but rather overflows into and onto others.

Just as a computer needs programming before it can operate, so it is the love we pour into our children that enables them to love in their turn.

Those who have been deprived of love and affection in their early years don't just struggle to relate emotionally to others, but there's evidence of lasting damage to their physical and intellectual development, as well as their mental and emotional wellbeing. So the MU's parenting programme is supporting parents in more than 20 countries.

From the moment the umbilical cord is severed and a child embarks on the journey from total dependence to independence, the mother's task is to replace that involuntary physical bond with voluntary bonds of love.

Dorothy Parker famously said the best way to keep our children at home is "to keep the atmosphere pleasant and let down the tyres", but in truth we know that 'love lies in the letting go.' Wanting the best for our children means not wanting to control them, or to try to force them into our own expectations of them. It's a love that involves the gift of freedom.

It's also a love that leaves its mark on you irrevocably. A mother never forgets the child she bears: a child who is stillborn, or dies, or is given up for adoption. The popularity of the television programme *Long Lost Family* is testament to the power of birth links, despite the severing of the umbilical cord: the desire to know where and who we came from, and to understand its impact on who we are. In Isaiah, God says, "See, I have engraved you on the palm of my hands."

And this love inevitably brings with it pain. Who this evening does not feel the agony of Mina Justice, the mother whose son Eddie was caught up in the shootings in the Orlando nightclub this weekend. She was woken in the small hours by a text message from him, "Momma, I love you" and then, after an increasingly desperate exchange of texts, shortly before he was shot, another message: "I'm gonna die."

Standing at the foot of the Cross, Mary had to watch her son die. But the pain is not only the pain of loss but also of sorrow when things go wrong.

As a parent, loving each of your children, you want them to love each other too. When PC Keith Blakelock was hacked to death on the Broadwater Farm estate in Tottenham 30 years ago, his widow Elizabeth was quoted as saying "I felt God's heart was breaking, that day on Broadwater Farm." The MU is turning that desire for loving, cooperative relationships into practical work for community reconciliation, for instance in Kenya and South Sudan.

And this love is also creative: the act of giving birth opens up new possibilities. It gives you a stake in the future and a vested interest not just in preserving the world but enabling it to flourish. That gives a fresh impetus to our concerns for the environment, and also for education: we want the next generation to flourish as individuals, but also to be capable of building a better society. These concerns are reflected in the literacy, financial, and health education programmes, and the campaigns for social justice, which are run by the Mothers' Union around the world.

Whether or not we are biological mothers, the MU shows us how we can all be involved in mothering, and thus reflect the love of God into his world, and help to shape its future. So, as we celebrate our faith and the work and witness of the Mothers' Union over the past 140 years, we remember with thanksgiving all those who have played a part in our own mothering; and we give thanks above all that we are all children of God, beloved and accepted in Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the end, as TS Eliot puts it, "Love is most nearly itself when here and now cease to matter," and that's perhaps the hardest part.

When Breath Becomes Air is a recently published best-selling account by a neuro-surgeon of his own terminal illness. His baby daughter was born not long before his death; struggling

to find the words to leave her a memory of him, he writes:
“There is perhaps only one thing to say to this infant, who is all future, overlapping briefly with me, whose life, barring the improbable, is all but past.

“That message is simple:

“When you come to one of the many moments in life where you must give an account of yourself, provide a ledger of what you have been, and done, and meant to the world, do not, I pray, discount that you filled a dying man’s days with a sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more, but rests, satisfied. In this time, right now, that is an enormous thing.”

Amen.