

I was once introduced to my mother. It happened in Henley-in-Arden High Street when I was still a teenager. I had met someone I had been at school with and we were catching up with our news. My mother had been shopping and as she came towards us, he turned to me and said “Michael, can I introduce?” And then of course realized that he couldn’t remember my mother’s name. It was a wonderful moment. A fortnight ago, I happened to meet this friend again after thirty years or more and reminded him of this occasion. He groaned.

I imagine we are all remembering our mothers today, and giving thanks for them. “Mother carries us in her own body”, writes Fred Milson, “nurtures us when we are helpless, and later on, may believe in us when nobody else does”. Mothers certainly provide the most obvious examples of mothering, but mothering is definitely not exclusive to them. Today is not Mother’s Day. That’s a celebration that comes from America, where it was authorised by Congress in 1914 and has been promoted over here by the Greeting Card industry. Let’s keep the word “Mothering”. Today is Mothering Sunday and although mothering certainly includes the loving and nurturing that mothers provide, there are plenty of other people and groups who exercise a mothering ministry, and today celebrates them too.

I am thinking particularly of single people who often get forgotten and feel excluded by days like this. Many of us have good reason to be grateful for the mothering we have received, and indeed are receiving, from people who are living single lives. In life as a whole, and in the Christian family too, such people play a hugely important part, and today is certainly for them.

But here’s another thought. A temptation to which we easily succumb, is to sentimentalise and domesticate the Gospel. So it’s worth remembering today that Jesus was particularly realistic about family relationships. He was well aware, for example, of our tendency to place parents and children ahead of God. Remember that occasion when he was told that his mother and his brothers were waiting outside to see him and he replied: “Who are my mother and my brothers? Anyone who does the will of God is my brother, and sister and mother”. The affection, the love, the

support that we receive from those closest to us, should never become a substitute for the love of God, but should point us towards that Love from whom all loving takes its origin.

It's a matter of first things, first. Much as he cherished the family, Jesus told his disciples – in a phrase we find hugely challenging – that in order to do the will of God they might have to hate their nearest and dearest. That's not because he despised motherhood or undervalued family ties. It's all part of Jesus' disturbing way of condemning the badness of goodness more often than the badness of badness. In other words, he recognizes that we are often most threatened by the corruption of our best qualities, rather than by the expression of our worst. Family life and relationships can be wonderful, but they can also be appallingly destructive. Within family life, we need to continually rely on the grace of God as we struggle to accept, forgive, encourage and support one another. Mothering never comes cheap.

Of course Jesus adored children, but does not fail to notice their petulance. He compared his generation to children playing in the market place and quarrelling, and this unsentimental realism about family relationships has been confirmed by modern knowledge and experience. We know today better than ever before about the many ways in which mothers can fail and how serious the consequences can be. And in ourselves we often have to recognize and accept feelings of resentment as well as love towards our own mothers. Growing through these uncomfortable feelings is all a part of our own journey into maturity.

“The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world”. Yes and the hearts that fail to love wisely fill the divorce courts, the prisons and the psychiatrist's couches. Today we celebrate mothering, one of the very best things in this world of dark shadows. But mothering, and mother's love, sometimes fails, sometimes through neglect, more often today through possessiveness, indulgence, materialism or by imposing values rather than by offering them. We are living through a time when mothering is failing. We talk about people who lack parenting skills and have to be helped to develop them. And we seem to be losing the capacity for gentleness and caring in our relationships with one another, in life as a whole.

Today can be a wake-up call for us all. Not many of us have the opportunity to be introduced to their mother like I was on Henley High Street, but we can all say “thank you” for the mothering we have received in our life. Mothering is open to us all. Whatever our sex, whatever our situation, we can all love, can all support, can all provide nurture and encouragement. We can all be listeners and comforters. In our prayers today, let’s give thanks for our mothers, pray for all those who are victims of failed mothering, and ask for a blessing upon our own opportunities for mothering.