

In these strange and extraordinary days, when it's too easy to be pulled down by fear or anxiety; more than ever, we need this festival that we celebrate today.

Because today is not only a celebration of mothers, today is a celebration of mothering. And, perhaps, during these past days in particular we will each have witnessed or experienced different expressions of mothering, albeit from afar, in the guise of the kindness of friends or of strangers.

This pandemic is undoubtedly unearthing both the best and the worst in us. But, for all the ill-mannered, self-centred behaviour and hoarding, there has also been an overwhelming wave of human kindness, which for many has restored some faith in humankind.

Today's celebrations will no doubt be bittersweet for most of us. Perhaps for the first time we will not physically be able to be with our own mothers. For others this day always hurts, because our mothers are no longer here or were never here. Or, perhaps, we have lost or longed for a child to mother.

So, today our God, the Mother Hen, would gather us, her brood, would enfold each one of us within those sheltering wings; and would call us to do the same for others.

Because mothering is something we are all called to be a part of.

We mother each time we bring something to birth in another person; a smile, a new confidence, hope.

We mother when with our words; we sooth or affirm; we nurture and encourage; we counsel and challenge.

We mother each time we protect; when the washing of hands or a staying away becomes a new act of love.

We mother each time we provide; when we push a prescription through a letterbox or drop off shopping or, indeed, a pot-plant on a doorstep. And if

you're passing St Andrew's today or tomorrow, feel free to pick up a pot plant to, anonymously perhaps, bring a smile to a neighbour's face.

And we mother when we hold.

In these days of isolation, we have been relying on new ways of holding from a distance. A thoughtful text; a lifeline phone call; waves or kisses blown from a screen or from afar. Most importantly, we hold each other as we pray because prayer has this incredible power to invisibly connect us; to tie us to one another. In prayer we are held in the embrace of each other and of God. Prayers carry us when we are too exhausted or disillusioned to pray for ourselves. Prayers lift us; lift up our downcast faces; lift us onto new shoulders so we can see differently. And when we can see differently, when our perspective changes, then we change, and if we change, then the world changes.

Later today I'd encourage anyone of any faith or none to light a candle at 7.00pm and to place it in your window as a symbol of defiant hope; of light in darkness, and for those who pray; as your prayer, your offering of yourself to be a light for others.

In our reading today [Luke 13. 31-35], Jesus is confronted with a very real and present threat. Word has it that Herod, the local despot, wants him dead; this same Herod who only months before had executed Jesus' cousin, John.

And Jesus' response is either fearless or foolish. 'Tell that fox,' he says, 'that I will keep doing, today and tomorrow, what I'm called to do – driving out demons; healing people.'

If we stop there for a second, and ask ourselves what particular 'demons' might currently be messing with our minds? I suspect Number One would be Fear; fear of the unknown; fear for our health or the health of others. And, if that is so, what then do we need to ask of the Healer of Nazareth?

Perhaps there's a clue in the next few verses, where immediately Jesus' defiance turns to sorrow as he looks out over the city and mourns: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing'.

Time and time again, Jesus said and says, 'do not be afraid'; 'do not be afraid, for I am with you, in this'.

As we look out over our changing lives and our changing world, Jesus asks, 'Are you willing to trust my love; are you ready to trust me with your fear; to allow me to shelter you as a Mother hen shelters her young?'

This week, as my diary emptied, I suddenly, like you perhaps, had to find new rhythms to my day; new ways of honouring this gift of time; of making it count for myself and for others; of investing in those relationships which too easily coast; of making memories.

And, already, one of my favourite memories has been driving in the car with Elijah, my 14-year-old son, singing at the top of our voices to REM's apocalyptic anthem 'It's the end of the world as we know it... and I feel fine!'

It felt empowering; like defiant hope laughing in the face of uncertainty. And it felt poignant, too, because this is the end of the world as we know it. Things will never be the same again. We will never be the same again. And the great question, of course, is, will we be changed for the better? How will these days increase our capacity for compassion? How will our faith grow; our love stretch; our hope sustain?

My prayer, too, is that we will learn to walk more gently upon our Mother Earth, who for the first time in a long time is beginning to breath and replenish.

Before I end with a poem that has been a prayer to me in these days, I'll send my love to you, wherever you are, and say: 'Til our paths cross again; God bless you and keep you. Keep safe, stay well.

It's called Lockdown by Brother Richard:

Yes, there is fear.

Yes, there is isolation.

Yes, there is panic buying.

Yes, there is sickness.

Yes, there is even death.

But.....They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise

You can hear the birds again.

They say that after just a few weeks of quiet

The sky is no longer thick with fumes

But blue and grey and clear.

They say that in the streets of Assisi

People are singing to each other across the empty squares

Keeping their windows open

So that those who are alone may hear

The sounds of family around them.

They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland

Is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.

Today a young woman I know is busy spreading fliers

With her number through the neighbourhood

So that elders may have someone to call on.

Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and Temples

Are preparing to welcome and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary.

All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting.

All over the world people are looking at their neighbours in a new way.

All over the world people are waking up to a new reality.

To how big we really are.

To how little control we really have.

To what really matters.

To love.

So, we pray and we remember that yes there is fear

But that does not have to be hate.

Yes, there is isolation

But that does not have to be loneliness.

Yes, there is panic buying

But that does not have to be meanness.

Yes, there is sickness

But there does not have to be disease of the soul.

Yes, there is even death

But there can always be a rebirth of love.

Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.

Today, breathe.

Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic

The birds are singing again.

The sky is clearing.

Spring is coming

And we are always encompassed by Love.

Open the windows of your soul

And though you may not be able to touch across the empty square

Sing.