

Mothering Sunday

Exodus 2.1-10 • Luke 2.33-35

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Christ Church, Chelsea

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At a young age he lost his father and mother. He was an orphan. His loving aunt and uncle brought him up – until one day his uncle was killed by an earthquake. His aunt grew older, until one day she realised that she could no longer offer him the care he needed. So she put him in a warm coat and hat, and packed his bag with plenty of food. She helped him get to a boat, and waved goodbye as the boat set off on its long voyage across the ocean. And so he arrived one day in cold, bustling London – knowing no-one, having no-one to care for him, lost. He sat down in the corner of a busy train station, near the lost property office. He wondered what to do. He took a bite of one of his last remaining marmalade sandwiches. And that is when Mr and Mrs Brown spotted this unusual character, with the simple label round his neck: 'Please look after this bear'.¹

When we think of the stories of Paddington, it's easy to think of his comic adventures around London and in the Brown household. But the saga begins, of course, with that very touching moment: the abandoned bear far from his beloved Aunt Lucy, and alone. And it's a scene that's far from fictional: less than twenty years before the first Paddington book was written, London train stations had been filled with

¹ The story is told in chapter one of *A Bear Called Paddington*. I don't know whether the earthquake is an embellishment of the 2014 film, and I don't know whether Paddington does indeed eat a marmalade sandwich at this point.

the sight of Jewish children arriving from continental Europe, each holding a small suitcase, and with a label around their neck giving their name and address. Just a few days earlier, each one of those children had said goodbye to their own mummies and daddies. Most would never see them again.²

So when in our Old Testament reading Moses' mother, a Hebrew slave in Egypt and forbidden to have a child, takes that three-month old baby down to the river Nile, places him in a basket, and leaves him in the reeds at the edge of that vast expanse of water, we don't need the Bible to spell out for us what she must have been feeling. Like Aunt Lucy, like those parents in pre-war Europe who sought at least to give life to their children, Moses' mother knew that if her child was to grow she had to say goodbye.

Motherhood is tough. Frequently joyous, yes. Deeply fulfilling, typically. But I think you will struggle to find a mother who wouldn't say that pregnancy, and birth, and nursing and beyond, are tough – perhaps the toughest thing they've done. That's true of a whole range of caring roles, of course. Being a dad, or a foster parent, or a grandparent, also stretches us in ways that we might never have thought possible. But – culturally, and dare I say it in the experience of many mothers – there's something distinctive about motherhood. The bonds are physical, and emotional, and psychic. They're deep, and they're life-changing.

So we're meant to hear the deep pain in the heart of Moses' mother when she lays her infant boy in that basket among the reeds. (A few

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paddington_Bear: On the bear's refugee status, Bond was inspired by the sight, during World War II, of [Jewish refugee children from Europe arriving in Britain](#) and of [London children who were being evacuated](#) to the countryside, the evacuees bearing luggage labels perhaps similar to that attached to the bear Paddington "Please look after this bear".^{[8][9]} Bond reflects, "They all had a label round their neck with their name and address on and a little case or package containing all their treasured possessions. So Paddington, in a sense, was a refugee, and I do think that there's no sadder sight than refugees". ("[Michael Bond, Paddington Bear Creator, Is Dead at 91](#)". *The New York Times*. Retrieved 23 November 2023.)

chapters later we're told her name is Jochebed (Ex 6.20), not that I knew that before preparing this sermon.) And we're meant too to hear the comedy of the episode that follows, as with the eyes of Moses' older sister Miriam we watch Pharaoh's daughter and her attendants head down the Nile and find the baby. The women gather round, cooing over the sweet little boy. With Miriam we wait our moment and then appear on the scene: 'oh! You've found a Hebrew baby! Would you like me to find a woman who can look after him for you?' And with the enthusiastic 'yes please' of Pharaoh's daughter ringing in her ears, Miriam runs along the riverbank, grabs Moses' mum, and brings her before Pharaoh's daughter. Moses lives, and Jochebed and baby are reunited.

We're meant to chuckle when we hear this story – the powerful oppressing Egyptians outsmarted by the young Hebrew girl. But there's also a poignancy to the tale. Moses and his mother are reunited. But only temporarily. For in time Jochebed must once again give up Moses, this time into the care of Pharaoh's daughter, and this time for good.

The rest of the Book of Exodus focuses on the story of Moses – that troubled, impulsive, sometimes violent child who will eventually lead the Israelites through the Red Sea to freedom. But in this initial episode I think we hear a mini-tale of motherhood. For we are supposed to celebrate the gift of motherhood enjoyed by Moses' mother. But we are also supposed to hear her pain at the parting that is postponed, but which will eventually come.

That's true of Jochebed. But it's also true of Mary, mother of Jesus. As our wonderful new Children's Choir will sing in today's anthem during communion: the words of the angel Gabriel to Mary, Ave Maria. 'Blessed are you among women.' Happy Mary, to bear the son of God.

But then in today's gospel reading, the prophecy of Simeon to Mary: '[A]nd a sword will pierce your own soul too'. A literal grief, in the case of Mary, when she three decades later will face the torment of watching Jesus in agony on the cross. Some of us may have known similar pain in being with those we love. But all of us will already know the Sword of Damocles that hangs above us when we have people we love – they're relationships we wouldn't give up for the world, but with that love comes the perpetual fear of the sadness if things went wrong.

It's often said that Mothering Sunday is a celebration of the love we receive from our mothers and those who care for us – a love that speaks in part of the love of God for each one of us. But perhaps this Mothering Sunday we can look the other way round – from the perspective not of what it is to be a child, but of what it is to be a mother. Ponder the joy and pain of motherhood: the delight of witnessing new life, and the sting of helping it to grow to independence. Reflect on that as it was known by Jochebed and Mary – and indeed of Aunt Lucy, as she prepared those marmalade sandwiches for her beloved nephew. And consider this too in terms of the vulnerability of God's love for us: fiercely protective (as Jesus puts it, like a hen gathering its chicks under her wing)³, yet knowing too that if we are to be fully human we must also be free; free to turn to him, and free to turn away.

To those of you who are mothers, and to those who care; thank you. To our own mothers and to those who care for us, whether we will speak to them on the phone this afternoon or whether we must store up our praise until the day we meet again: thank you. Motherhood is tough. Yet in it we may truthfully say that you live into the love of God, a love that is faithful in this life, to the grave, and forevermore.

³ Matthew 23.37; Luke 13.34.