

Care

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Preacher: Rev. Suzy Kirkham

[0 : 00] Well, good morning everyone and happy Mother's Day. Today we're celebrating Mothering Sunday and I wish to emphasise the word celebrate.

It can mean rejoice, revel, have fun, enjoy and it can also mean praise. Today's celebration is of motherhood, love, nurture and parenting.

Ideally, motherhood should be the most joyous and positive experience that we have. Although realistically, I'm sure most of you know here, no lifelong experience like motherhood will ever reach the perfection of total unwavering joy and positivity.

And our reading today reflects, as well as the joy, a little of the other side of motherhood. So let's pray before I start. Heavenly Father, we praise and thank you as we celebrate Mothering Sunday, a chance to express thankfulness and joy as we remember our own mothers or carers who have or still are serving their families.

We also remember and pray for those whom today will find it difficult and sad. And we ask that your unfailing love will surround them and that they will feel your presence in their lives.

[1 : 22] Amen. According to the latest UN global estimates, over 300,000 women a year die in childbirth because of complications due to pregnancy.

That's 830 women in the prime of their lives, dying each day, roughly one every two minutes. Most of these are on the African continents in Nigeria and India.

The UK does fare much better with only 13 in 100,000 pregnancies tragically ending this way.

However, the greatest risk for maternal deaths in this country is social class.

The rate among socially excluded women is 20 times higher than professional women with their own homes and reliable incomes, while women from ethnic minorities have three times the rate of the overall population.

So happy Mother's Day, everyone. Why are we thinking about this gap today? Why on a day that we're supposed to be celebrating, am I bringing up these tragic statistics?

[2 : 33] Why pause to remember the gap, the risk and tragedy that plays out globally on a day when we come together as churches up and down the country to pray and give thanks?

A time when we can celebrate the hard work, the love, the nurture, and the year in and year out investment of love, no matter how flawed it may be. Well, it's precisely the fact that there is actually no guarantee, no cast-iron right for those who either want to conceive and who are unable to, or those who are awaiting the wonderful gift of birth and the arrival of a newborn in the household, but who might instead face a time of terrible grief with the loss of a mother or the little baby, or both. This, sadly, is sometimes the harsh reality of everyday life, the slipstream of sadness, tragedy, risk, social-economic injustice or accident that pebbles our experience of living.

So our reading today from the Old Testament, it really underpins Hannah's greatly desired joy of conception, a safe pregnancy and birth of a child.

However, as we've read today, she was locked in an intimate arena of public humiliation, persistent bullying and ridicule from her wife, Penaya. Now, it's probably good to say here that whilst having another wife in this culture was tolerated, it definitely wasn't recommended, and it caused a lot of problems.

[4 : 09] And as a good friend of mine says, just because you can do it doesn't actually mean that it's right. And I think we can surmise here that Elkanah loved Hannah, who at the time wasn't able to have children, so much more than Penaya, who he was married to, because she could have children, and had many of them.

Having children in those days was not just a nice thing to do. It was a necessity when you lived in those kind of farming cultures. You needed your children to help with the work, and they were

assets.

So as you can imagine, there would have been a lot of conflict. Penaya would have known that Elkanah loved Hannah, and would have been jealous of this. And she would have used that fact that Hannah couldn't have children to bully and provoke her.

Having to have children as an asset or a legacy was deeply embedded in the Hebrew culture. Hannah, sadly, had been able to conceive with her husband Elkanah, and despite reassurances from him that it was devoted to her, whether she had kids or not, she was distraught.

And not only were the presence of Penaya's sons and daughters a constant reminder that Hannah had been able to fulfil the demand of culture, the expectations of her wider family, and her own heart's desire to have a child.

[5 : 27] So then we look at Hannah's prayer. It's in this chapter that Hannah brings the Bible's first wordless prayer to us. Every year, Elkanah and his household would make a pilgrimage to the shrine of Shiloh, where the tent shrine and the Ark of Covenant were present.

It was one of the key sites for the Israelite pilgrimages at that time. And they thought if they were going to hear God, that was the place that it would be.

And as it says in verses 12 to 14, such was Hannah's fervent prayer that the high priest Eli thought she was drunk. If anyone has seen the Holy Spirit at work, sometimes it does look like, yeah, you can have strange manifestations and it can look like you're drunk.

But her wordless petition is answered by the priest Eli when he tells her to go in peace and that the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him. She then departs with a steady conviction that God has heard her deepest desire and it says her countenance was sad no longer.

So God answers her prayers and she becomes pregnant with Samuel. Her exultant song of praise when she finally gives birth and brings him to the temple when he is fully to be weaned, to be lent to the Lord as long as he lives, reminds me of the beautiful song, the Magnificat, which is Mary's song from Luke, when she finds out that she's going to be pregnant with Jesus.

[6 : 56] And that goes like this. My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour. He has looked with favour on his lowly servant.

From this day, all generations will call me blessed. The Almighty has done great things for me and holy is his name. He has mercy on those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has strong strength with his arm and has scattered the proud within their conceit, casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel to remember his promise of mercy, the promise made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever. Amen.

So this morning, what is your heart's desire? What is your wordless prayer on this day as we remember the authenticity of wordless, heartfelt, fully focused prayer?

[8 : 06] You may grieve for children you never had or who you are separated from or you've lost. Maybe you're grieving for a household divided or dreams of a family full of peace being ransacked by disappointment, human frailty, illness or the cruelty of others.

Or you may lift up your voice to petition against the poverty and the lack of fairly shared resources to enable all pregnant women to be able to have a safe pregnancy and healthy babies.

or maybe your prayer is something different entirely. So loving God, our Heavenly Father, in our worship today, we thank you for all that our mothers mean to us and for all that they do for us.

But we also know that for some people in this is a difficult day of hurt, grief and perhaps anger. For those whose mothers have died, whose child has died, or those who have been able to have children.

For those who have or have had difficult relationships with mothers or those whose mothers are unwell. We ask for comfort for all who are grieving, dealing with loss and heartache, especially on this day.

[9 : 25] And we ask for strength for those who mourn, for healing for those who have been hurt by relationships and faith for those who long to have a child. We thank and praise you, Lord, today for all the women who has cared for us, fed us, taught us, clothed us, believed in us, loved us, made sacrifices for us and given in all manner of other ways to raise us to become the people we are today.

And finally, Lord, we ask that as we make our petitions of prayer to you this morning, that we would also work together to work for a world where children are raised in full health and their mums enjoy peace in their homes, in households where neighbour cares for neighbourhood and no one is left behind.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Mmm mmm mmm mmm mmmM