

MOTHERING SUNDAY 31/03/2019

Exodus 2:1-10
Colossians 3:12-17
Luke 2:33b-35

I wonder how many of you have seen the Toy Story films?

The original film came out in 1995 – the year my eldest son was born - and at the time it was a ground-breaking piece of computer animation. It focuses on a box full of toys belonging to a little boy, Andy. His favourite is Woody the cowboy – until, that is, one birthday a new rival for Andy's affections arrives – Buzz Lightyear, a space ranger.

Toy Story 2 came out in 1999, and added to the cast was Jessie the cowgirl, who had been previously owned by a little girl but who had been discarded when her owner grew too old for her.

In 2010 Toy Story 3 came out – and won the Oscar for best animated film. This one focussed on Andy clearing out his room before he goes to college and what happens to all his toys when he leaves.

Again, it is a brilliant film – very funny, beautifully animated, with really credible characters. But I have to tell you that I can hardly bear to watch it, even now. By then my son was a 15-year-old starting to think about going to university and it was all rather too close for comfort. I've seen it twice and ended up weeping buckets both times. So although it is a lovely film, for the moment it's still on my 'banned' list, probably until my younger son has well and truly left home!

Toy Story 4 is due out later this year and those of us who are fans will be keen to see what happens next, now that the toys have a new owner.

Of course, the real skill of the animators of all the Toy Story films is that they introduce us to believable toy characters and they have a great adventure – but that's just what the children watching it see. For adults, the toys themselves represent our deepest loves, fears, disappointments, heartbreak. That's why they are such a joy and yet such a hard thing to watch.

Mothering Sunday is one of the best loved days of the year, whether as a secular celebration or as a church festival. It's a moment to show our mothers how grateful we are for what they have done for us, an opportunity to treat them with cards, flowers and chocolates or a meal out, a time to remember them with love, even if they are no longer with us. For Christians, it's also a day to remember Mother Church, which nurtures us in our faith.

But it's a day which also invites us to reflect on the more uncomfortable side of motherhood – to remember that there are sometimes darker aspects to the mother-child relationship. Our Old Testament reading today gives us something of an insight into this.

Moses' mother, who we find out elsewhere is called Jochebed, is an Israelite woman living in exile in Egypt. She has given birth to a bouncing, healthy baby boy, but into a political situation in which his life is immediately in danger. If she can't keep him hidden he will be killed by the Egyptians.

To begin with she manages to conceal him – but by the time he's three months old, with a good pair of lungs on him, she realises the game is up. If she keeps him, he will be killed.

So Jochebed takes one of the most difficult decisions a mother could ever have to make. She decides he stands a better chance without her. But what should she do with him? She needs to find some way of ensuring there is an opportunity he may be found and looked after by someone else.

This requires some guile and risk-taking on her part. My guess is that she has worked out that Pharaoh's daughter goes down to the river to bathe every day and she sees that as Moses' best chance of survival. So she prepares a basket to make it waterproof and puts the baby in it and leaves it among the reeds at the edge of the river. What a heartbreaking and yet courageous thing to do!

Then she gets her daughter Miriam to stand nearby and watch what happens. Will someone notice him and take him away, or will he just be washed slowly down the river to an unknown fate? Whatever happens, his mother cannot afford to be seen anywhere nearby and she can probably hardly bear to watch.

As the story unfolds, we hear that Pharaoh's daughter finds the baby and takes pity on him. She knows full well that he is an Israelite child, but her compassion is such that she decides to bring him up as her own. And Miriam, quick-witted girl that she is, manages to suggest someone who may be able to nurse the baby in return for payment.

So it is that Moses, under the protection of Pharaoh's daughter, is able to go back to mum at least for a while – until he's about 2½ - after which she has to give him up for good to go and live at the palace.

Jochebed must experience heartbreak twice over – once as she abandons him to his fate as a baby, and again as she has to give him up as a toddler to a life of luxury with his adoptive mother, Pharaoh's daughter. But in all that, she has achieved her deepest desire, which is to ensure his survival and his best chance in life.

Many of you will remember the Asian tsunami of Boxing Day 2004, which claimed the lives of more than 200,000 people. I recall one heart-rending account from that event which has stayed in my memory ever since. A British mum, on holiday with her husband and two sons, was swept off the beach with the children by the tsunami wave. She quickly realised that the force of the water was so great that she could only hold on to one of them. The little one was only five and she knew that, without her, he stood no chance. The older one was about eight – and, let's face it, his chances weren't good either – but she had to make a choice. She could try and save one or lose them both. So she let go of the elder boy.

Some minutes later she was rescued with the younger child. But as the day wore on and the bodies began to be washed up on the beach, she and her husband went looking among them, desperate to find their elder child but convinced that he must be dead.

Imagine their amazement and their joy when suddenly he came running up the beach towards them!

He had been washed up alive some distance further down the coast and had made it back along the beach to where they were staying. It's one of the few miracles to come out of that dreadful event.

The ancient story of Moses and this modern tsunami account are thankfully situations which most of us in this country would consider pretty extreme. But even for us there is perhaps a lesson. For all mothers, all parents, there is a moment at which we have to let our children go. The job of parenting is to nurture them and equip them so that one day they are able to fly the nest and be the people God intends them to be. And that means we must be prepared to risk letting them go, even though that causes us pain. Thankfully for most of us it is a moment which is also tinged with pride, as we realise they have blossomed into young adults who have a hope-filled future ahead of them.

Our Gospel reading reminds us of Simeon's insightful words to Mary, as she brings the infant Jesus to the Temple for the purification required by Jewish law.

Simeon realises that this baby is to be the saviour of all Israel, but that will only be achieved through great suffering - suffering which Mary will also have to endure. Little can she know that, when he has grown up, she will have to watch her precious son dying upon the cross. And it is in those prophetic words that we are also reminded that some parents have to endure the loss of their beloved child, and others have to live with the heartbreak of never being able to have children of their own.

So Mothering Sunday is a day which we should celebrate with joy:
as children, giving thanks for our own mothers;
as mothers as we enjoyed being made a fuss of;
as families, as we have the opportunity to enjoy each other's company in a special way today.

But we also hold in our hearts those for whom Mothering Sunday is a painful day:
those who long for children but cannot have them;
those whose relationship with their own mother or their own child is difficult;
those who have recently lost their mother;
those who are separated from their children;
and those who have lost children through death or in other ways.

And let us also give thanks for foster parents, adoptive parents and carers who, by their love, show God's love to children who are not their own.