

MOTHERING SUNDAY

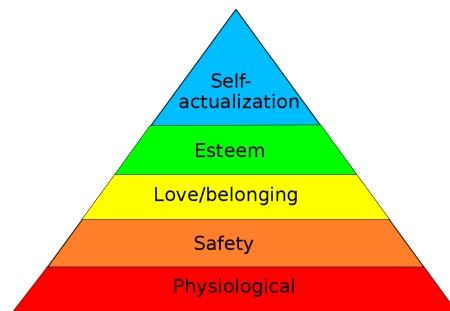
University church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford

25th March 2017

THE REVD CHARLOTTE BANNISTER-PARKER

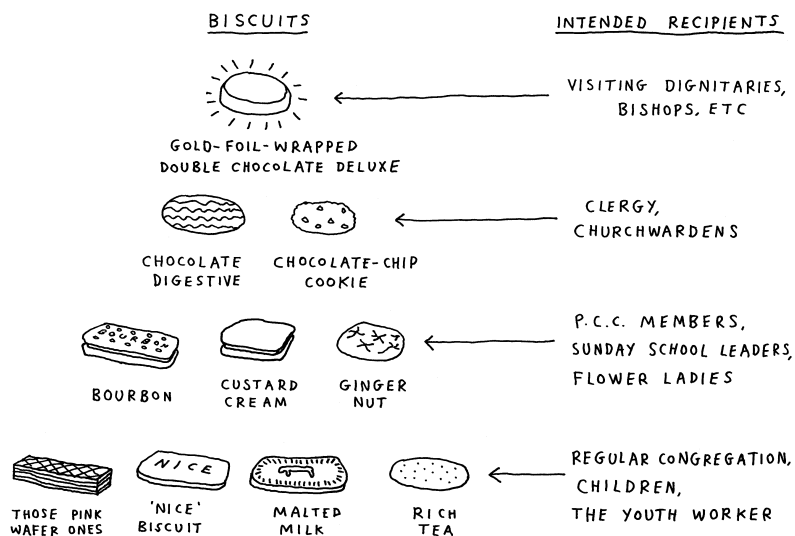
A huge welcome this glorious spring morning to St Mary's. It is fantastic to see so many of you here so early on Mothering Sunday!

Now I have a secret to share with you. Running St Mary's can be quite a job so to help the whole team Ana, our wonderful brilliant hard-working Administrator, has put up in the office a very important notice. Some of you might know Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It is a pyramid of our human needs in order of priority.



Ana, in her wisdom, has put up the *Hierarchy of Chocolate* instead. It reminds me of a cartoon from my favourite Church Cartoonist, Dave Walker:

THE HIERARCHY OF BISCUITS



Now I need some help because I want to share with you all another of his famous cartoons. Can all the children come up and help me hand these out to everyone?

So while his work is being spread throughout the church I thought this would be a good time to talk about even more food, specifically 'The Great St Mary's Cake Bake-off'. Some of you might be able to see over there some absolutely beautiful creations that the Sunday school have made and will be selling after the service in support of our linked project, *Hope for the Living* in Roodepan, a township on the outskirts of Kimberley. We know those children have so very little and we are supporting them in getting a second cooked nutritional meal a week. So a HUGE thank you to the Sunday school and to anyone else who has baked a cake for the sale.

Claire did not believe it would happen but I tried my hand at making a Simnel Cake yesterday - here it is. Like in Blue Peter we have my creation ... and one made by the professionals!

Now do most of you have your cartoon? OK on one side there is just a 'congratulations' for making it here this morning with the clocks going forward, but on the other is the essence of today; the quandary of Mothering Sunday. How Walker approached it I thought was *very St Mary's!*

You see today the country celebrates Mother's Day - so a good cup of tea in bed is great, even the washing up and a card! But actually this day represents a tradition quite different from what we celebrate nowadays.

First there is the tradition of the cake. Today is also known as Refreshment Sunday or Laetare Sunday. Traditionally, on the 4th Sunday of Lent (Laetare Sunday), we can take a rest from our Lenten vows. As early as 1226 there is a reference to bread made from simnel - fine white flour. The recipe has morphed over the centuries and now it is made with white marzipan with eleven balls to signify the 11 disciples minus Judas.

Laetare Sunday later became a day when domestic servants were given a day off to visit their 'mother church' - often the church they were baptised in or the main church or cathedral in the area - just like you have today. Anyone who did this was commonly said to have gone 'a-mothering', although whether this term preceded the observance of Mothering Sunday is unclear.

It was often the only time that whole families could gather together, since on other days they were prevented by conflicting working hours, and servants were not given free days on other occasions. It became customary for young servant girls to bake a Simnel cake to take back home for their mother to celebrate this rare time together. And so the baking of 'refreshments' for our break from Lent and going 'a-mothering' on Laetare Sunday has evolved over the centuries into what we now know as Mothering Sunday or Mother's Day.

So now we know the true origins of Mothering Sunday we can see that today is much more than celebrating our mothers. We all had or have mothers, but some will have lost them to the heavenly realm, some will be a long distance away, and some are not mothers themselves.

And this brings me to our gospel reading. Jesus, in handing John - his favourite disciple - to Mary, redefined the relationship between mother and son to be that which is not blood but

grounded in the nature and quality of love between two people. To fill the vacuum that his death will inevitably leave in both their hearts he turns to them as says,

"Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.
(John 19:25)

And of course Mary knew this time could come. Simeon warned Mary when Christ was presented at the Temple that it will be a deeply painful moment

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed - and a sword will pierce your own soul too."
(Luke 2:33)

But John takes her into his home and they fill each other with spiritual love – love that transcends physical boundaries. And when we need love, we too can reach out for it. In returning to our home church (or mother church), we fill up our lives left by the vacuum of pain or despair with spiritual love, and are comforted.

I am reminded of the famous Wordsworth Poem:

*I wondered lonely as a cloud
that floats on high o'er vales and hills
when all at once I saw a crowd
a host of golden daffodils
beside the lake beneath the tress
fluttering and dancing in the breeze.*

*For oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude
And then my heart with pleasure fills and
Dances with the daffodils.*

Wordsworth loves nature so much that he is able to feel the love of the immanent 'Presence' or 'Being'. So when Wordsworth is feeling sad or vacant, he remembers his vision of the daffodils and this vision "fills his heart with bliss". The great poet is able to see a field of daffodils in a way that enhances his spirituality and his love of nature which in turns bring him closer to the divine.

So today let us, yes, celebrate mothers and all the work they do but let us also realise that it is so much more than that. It is a day when we celebrate how lucky we are to have food – to even have cake when many have so little. It is a day to celebrate spring and the beauty of God's creation through the giving and receiving of daffodils which like Wordsworth reminds us of the divine in nature and all life. It is a day to celebrate our mother church here at St Marys and all it gives each and everyone us of us; where all are welcome and we are bound together with something stronger than blood ties.

I would like to end with the words from Colossians 3:12-17, which I think encapsulates what we can experience here in this church. As you receive during the next hymn a daffodil, handed out again by the children, remember these words which bind us together.

“Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.”

Amen.