**30th March 2025 Mothering Sunday**

**Call to worship**

Here, there are no strangers,
**for all are welcome in this house.**
Here, there is only acceptance,
**for all are welcome in this house.**
Here, there are no divisions,
**for all are welcome in this house.**
So let us worship in unity and love.

**A gathering prayer**

Loving God,
we gather in this place assured of your love.
You know our failures, fickleness and faithlessness,
yet you still welcome us into your presence.
Help us to do the same,
welcoming all in your name. **Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

Draw near one and all.
No one is excluded.
Enjoy the loving welcome of God’s warm embrace.
Let us sing, rejoice and celebrate the Father’s care.

**A prayer of adoration**

Awesome, Father God of endless love and wide-open arms,
**we come in adoration.**
Your embrace encompasses all.
You exchange our filthy rags for the finest robes,
the pig trough for the banquet table.
Awesome, Father God of endless love and wide-open arms,
**we come in adoration.**
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

**We come seeking your forgiveness, Father God:**
for our bad attitude toward you and others;
for the times we feel hard done by and wronged;
for wanting to go our own way, in the opposite direction to you;
for shunning those who don’t conform to our expectations;
for judging people on their appearance, speech or wealth.
**We come seeking your forgiveness, Father God.**
Help us to change as individuals and as a church.
Help us to be more welcoming,
making no distinction between the homeless and the high-flyers.
Help us to care for others as you care for us.
Help us to listen and trust in you.
**We come seeking your forgiveness and renewal, Father God.**
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

God gifted us his Son Jesus Christ.
Through his blood, we are cleansed.
Like the prodigal son, we are forgiven and restored to God.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Generous God,
on this Mothering Sunday, we thank you for mothers, parents and
all who care for us. Love shapes our life.
But none more so than your love, which is beyond any other.
Thank you that you do not leave us wallowing in the mess
we make of life, but wait patiently for us to come to our senses.
Thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, who paid for our sin
with his immeasurable sacrifice.
Thank you for your Holy Spirit, who keeps us on track.
Thank you that when we return to you, we are always sure of
a warm, comforting embrace.
**Father, Son and Holy Spirit, thank you for restoring us.**
**Amen**

**Put out the flags E S**

**Make some welcome bunting**

You will need: triangles of coloured paper, coloured pens, string, stapler or other means of tying the triangles to the string.

* Hand out the triangles of coloured paper, one per person. Invite people to use the coloured pens to write on the triangle one thing that helps them feel welcome in church (e.g. being greeted by name, knowing what is going on).
* Then attach all the triangles to the string (e.g. by using a stapler) to make bunting. Hang this over the entrance to your space as a reminder.

**Luke 15.1-3, 11-32;**

The relationship between any mother and her children is always complex. With recent parent teacher evenings, I was reminded of the boy who said ‘I wouldn’t say my mother was ashamed of me, but she used to go to parent’s evenings under an assumed name.

A salesman rings on the doorbell of a house. The door is answered by a teenage boy smoking a cigarette, with a tin of beer in one hand and a copy of Playboy tucked under his arm. The salesman says, ‘Is your mother at home?’ The boy said, ‘what do you think?’

The parable of the Prodigal Son is about a son who goes off the rails. There is no mention of a mother in the parable. Was she running the household? Was she praying for reconciliation between father and son? Had she died? Some suggest that the father in the story behaves more like a mother. On this Mothering Sunday I want to use the parable to reflect on its many themes and how it may touch our lives – as parents, as children, as siblings, as people who may feel lost or who may feel under appreciated.

One of the most talked-about TV shows at the moment is Netflix's hard-hitting drama Adolescence[[1]](#endnote-1). It tells thefictional story of a 13-year-old boy who is accused of stabbing a girl, and the factors that could have turned him into a killer.

Chief among them are social media and the influence of incel (involuntary celibate) ideas, which encourage men to blame women for their lack of relationships and opportunities.

His parents, school and friends are all shown as playing a part in various ways.

Jamie, the 13 year old boy is bullied on social media to make him feel ugly, and is exposed to incel messaging and skewed views on sexual violence.

He is this vulnerable kid, and then he hears this stuff which makes sense to him about why he's isolated, why he's alone, why he doesn't belong, and he ingests it. At his age he doesn't have the filters to understand what's appropriate, he starts to believe that the only way to reset this balance is through violence."

Last week, former England football manager [**Sir Gareth Southgate delivered a speech**](https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m00293l5/the-richard-dimbleby-lecture-sir-gareth-southgate) warning against "callous, manipulative and toxic influencers". Concerns that young men spent their days gaming, gambling and watching pornography and the damage that caused to their lives and attitudes. He called for better role models.

Jack Thorne the writer of Adolescence, who’s own son is now 8 years old and who he is worried about for the future and how he communicates with him, replied by saying "Role models obviously can have a huge impact on people. But truthfully, we've got to change the culture that they're consuming and the means by which our technology is facilitating this culture.

Should that be a law, similar to Australia, banning children under 16 from using social media?

There always has been a spiritual battle for our very souls. The Bible says all have sinned. Sin is all pervasive and warps our attitudes and lives. Yet we all have choices about who we let influence us and what paths they lead us down.

Jesus said (John 10 when he talks about himself as the Good Shepherd) the Thief comes to steal and destroy. He has come to give us life. Who is thieving us of our lives? How can we stop them? But the fact is that people in our society aren’t looking to Jesus for life (although we celebrate today nine people who are making their promises to follow the way of Jesus). Most people seem to be more attracted by the temptations of the far-off country and the wild living it offers. Like the youngest son in this parable.

We are not told in any detail what the father in the parable said to the son who wanted to leave. In asking for his inheritance now, he was effectively saying to his father I wish you were dead, because I want my inheritance now. The father gave into his request and allowed him his own way.

We can speculate that the father in Jesus’ story doesn’t seem to want to cause unnecessary resentment and a block in his relationship to his son. Painful though it is, he allows his son to go his own way, even with his money. I’m sure it was breaking the father’s heart. Whatever he said to the son, he was able to leave the relationship open for his son to return.

How we talk to each other is so important. I read a list of ‘things you’ll never hear a mother say to her child’. Listen to some of these:

Don’t bother wearing a jacket – it’s quite warm out’

‘Let me smell that shirt. Yes, that’s good for another week’.

‘I think that an untidy bedroom is a sign of creativity’

‘Yes, I used to play truant’

‘No, I don’t have a tissue on me – just use your sleeve’

And my personal favourite:

‘just turn your underpants inside out. No one will ever know.’

You wouldn’t hear a ‘good’ mother saying these things. Are there perhaps other more serious things that a good mother would not say to her children?

I know that when people make absolute demands or give absolute ultimatums, they can back themselves into a corner and not allow any room for compromise or negotiation or crucially for reconciliation.

I heard a story a while back about a mother and son who lived in a village. The son was in his early twenties and had been brought up since he was two years old by his mother after his father had left home for another woman.

The son was seeing a girl who his mother didn’t approve of and she let him know. The son continued to see this girl then one day announced he was going to move to the city, take up a new job and move in with his girlfriend. His mother was horrified, and they got into a verbal slanging match.

Things were said on either side, as years of bitterness and resentment poured out. The mother said how much she had cared for him and sacrificed for him, especially after her husband had left her. Her son was being self-centred and disrespectful. Just like his father.

Her son told her she wasn’t a good mother and no wonder his father had left her when he was younger. The argument ended with an ultimatum from the mother that if her son walked out on her he would never be welcomed back.

The son walked out.

The mother was heartbroken. She cried bitterly for weeks. She desperately wanted her son back. Yet he made no contact. She wrote him many letters asking his forgiveness and pleading for him to get in touch. She realised she was being unreasonable, and he had his life to lead. She passed these letters on through a friend of his son. Still no word.

Every night she would put a light on in his bedroom. She wanted it to be a sign of welcome. Whenever he chose to return, his room was ready. She did this every night for the next fifteen years. The light shone from his bedroom. It shone out in the village. There was a welcome ready. But it was never taken up. The mother died of a broken heart and her son never returned home.

Should she have just got on with her life and accepted that mistakes had been made. Was she stupid to keep putting on the light every night, always prepared to welcome back her long-lost son?

Whatever the father in the parable said to his son, as he headed off to the far country with his inheritance to squander on wild living, the father must’ve made sure that there was always an open invitation for the son to return and for reconciliation to be made.

Watch your words. Leave the light on.

The son in the parable leaves home but after he has squandered his inheritance and falls on hard times he comes to his senses and realises that he still has a home to go back to.

Perhaps we can think of times in our lives when we have come to our senses, or we can think of others who have come to their senses, or perhaps we know of certain people who we hope will one day come to their senses! Life!

When the son returns in the parable of the Prodigal Son, we are told that while he was still a long way off his father saw him, he was filled with compassion, literally his heart went out to him first before the father actually ran to meet him and flung his arms around him and kissed him. Again speculation, but it implies that the father was constantly watching and waiting for a chance that his son would return.

The prodigal returns in the parable of Jesus and is welcomed, hugged and kissed by the father. The father is so overjoyed. He had feared the worst that his young son might be dead! But here he is alive and well and home, safe and sound. The father is so happy that he calls for a great celebration.

 But when the elder brother hears of it. He is hurt, jealous, confused, resentful and angry. He feels sorry for himself, but more than that and worse, he feels that the father has rejected him!

Of course, we know better! We know that the father has not rejected him at all. He wasn't being rejected, but he thought he was. Sometimes we "feel" rejected when we really aren't being rejected. Maybe the father could have told his older son more often that he was deeply loved. We all need to hear words of affirmation.

My father never said he loved me. I knew he did by his actions, but rarely ever from his lips. He was of that generation and class that didn’t do emotions – they were a sign of weakness and you had to survive tough times, war and rationing – stiff upper lip and packing up those troubles in the old kit bag and smile smile smile.

Scholars suggest it is the party itself that angers the older brother. Both Judaism and Christianity provide for the return of sinners, but to bread and water, not fatted calf; to sackcloth, not a new robe; to ashes, not jewellery; to kneeling, not dancing; to tears, not merriment"

This is a story of sibling rivalry - the older brother's anger evoking "the child's first ethical statement, 'It's not fair'. Perhaps you’re an older child who has seen the younger ones getting away with so much more than you did?

Are there people who do not "deserve" forgiveness quite so easily? What about people whose behaviours have been destructive of others? This parable, this command, of Jesus to forgive and then we will be forgiven – is so deeply troubling and radical.

Are both sons lost to the father: one "to a life of recklessness," and the other "to a more serious fate, to a life of angry self-righteousness and unforgiveness that takes him so far away from his father that he might as well be feeding pigs in a far country. The parable challenges us to reflect on how our unforgiveness may block us receiving the love, especially the love of God.

The inference is that God is like the father in the parable, giving his son freedom to do his own thing, but watching every day, to see whether he’s coming back. And when he sees his son on the road, rushes out to meet him, full of joy and welcome. He doesn’t even wait for his son to say sorry, he organises a party.

Barbara Bradford Taylor says the father "does not love either of his sons according to what they deserve. Both are selfish in their own ways. He just loves them, more because of who he is than because of who they are."  "It is up to each one of us to decide whether we will stand outside, like the eldest son, all alone being right, or give up our rights and go inside and take our place at a table full of reckless and righteous saints and scoundrels, brothers and sisters united only by our relationship to one loving father, who refuses to give us the love we deserve but cannot be prevented from giving us the love we need"

As we move towards Easter, we will be reminded of the Christian message. Jesus came to us, God made flesh, to remind us this is not an impersonal universe, much as it is fashionable these days to dis-believe God created all things and is behind all things. People say to me ‘prove to me God exists?’ I say I can’t prove it nor can you disprove it – but when I look out from a mountain top and see this wonderful world I can’t believe that we are here by chance, that all that I am is just a collection of atoms and my thoughts, feelings are just chemical activity in the brain; that love is just a delusion, that any sense of what is right and wrong, the depths of my conscience, is just social conditioning. When I stand by the bedside of a dying person my hearts yearns that this is not it, not the last word.

Deep down I know that there is a God calling out through the universe to be connected to me. And at Easter we remind ourselves that Jesus came to reconnect us – to bring us back home – to a home that is welcoming, to a God who has words of welcome, words of love and forgiveness, to a God who stands with arms open wide, a God who has left the light on, who is watching, waiting for us and who runs to meet us at the first sign of us turning up.

The light is always on. The compassion is always there. The arms are always wide to welcome and embrace. What is lost can be found.

Bibliography: Tim Keller, Preaching, Hodder 2015

Barbara Bradford Taylor's sermon, "The Prodigal Father," is in *The Preaching Life*).

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**Prayers of intercession**

Father, we thank you for welcoming us into your family.
**Help us to welcome others too.**

Father, we rejoice that we are welcomed into your presence today and every day. Thank you so much for taking the first steps, making the first move, rushing towards us with open arms of forgiveness, love and joy. Help us never to take your love for granted. Instead, give us the grace and the courage to be as welcoming to others as you are to us.

Father, we thank you for welcoming us into your family.
**Help us to welcome others too.**

Father, on this Mothering Sunday in the UK, we turn our thoughts and prayers to our families. We thank you for all those who behave as mothers towards us whether we are related to them or not. We pause for a moment to think about what we can do to show kindness and care to them too…

We pray for everyone who lives in the same house as us, as well as those who are our neighbours, or who we long to see face to face but, for whatever reason, can only speak to over the phone or the internet. Thank you for the technology that can bring us closer. We think of a particular special moment with our loved ones this week. Help us to hold it in our hearts and minds so it brings a smile when things get tough.

Father, we thank you for welcoming us into your family.
**Help us to welcome others too.**

Father we pray for all those who do not feel welcome where they live. For children who are unhappy, abused, afraid... For those who are in care and longing for the love of a forever family…. We pray for those who have lost touch with people they love and don’t know how to find a way back…. For those who have bad arguments this week and don’t know how to say sorry and start a reconciliation…

We pray for refugees and those living in unfamiliar places who just want to go home but cannot….

Help us to be ready to provide love and care wherever we see a need. We pray for our local foodbanks, for refugee agencies, foster carers, warm welcome spaces… anywhere and anyone in our locality that provides welcome and care.

Father, we thank you for welcoming us into your family.
**Help us to welcome others too.**

Lord, we thank you for this church congregation. We think back to the first time we came here… what or who was it that encouraged us to return? We pray for the people sitting on either side of us today; for those behind and in front of us; our friends and those whose names we do not know. And we pray for those who will come into this church for the first time this week: as a visitor; as someone enquiring about you; those who want time alone with you to pray; for those who may come to a funeral or a wedding or just want to look and see. Father may our welcome be as warm as your welcome is to us. May those who come through our doors meet with you in a deeply meaningful way and may they leave here rejoicing that they have had an encounter with a Father who loves them.

Father, we thank you for welcoming us into your family.
**Help us to welcome others too.**

Father, we focus now on the world around us. We think of those places in our world where we have seen evidence of welcoming love this week, particularly….

And we cry out to you for those places where love and joy seems to have disappeared, as if it will never return… especially in the Middle East, the Ukraine and Russia, so many parts of Africa. We pray for those who work to bring peace, harmony and restoration. May they be kept safe and given all the wisdom they need to bring conflicts to a successful conclusion.

Father, we thank you for welcoming us into your family.
**Help us to welcome others too.**

As we go forward into the week ahead may we know the loving Father-heart of God in us and all around us. May we take that love to everyone we meet and into everything we do. And may we return next week refreshed by God’s love ready to praise him for all that he has done for us.

**Amen.**

**A prayer for all ages together**

God of welcome
when we turn back to you *(mime turning around)*
you run towards us with open arms. *(extend arms out to sides)*
Help us to offer others the welcome we’d like to receive, *(shake hands with person next to you)*
whoever they are.
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

As we go into the coming week, O God,
and strive to walk as people of welcome,
fill us with your grace, mercy and peace.
Bless us, keep us and transform us all,
and help us to share these gifts with all we meet.
**Amen.**

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0egyyq1z47o> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)