

Mother Church gives us life, nourishes us through the sacraments, and leads us gradually into the light of faith.

This Sunday has a special colour, and various names. The colour is pink to most eyes, but look more carefully and you'll see a shade that the Dulux Paint colour chart names: rose. Rose is still a Lent colour, but a more joyful version of the deep violet we see in these weeks. The names of this Sunday include: Fourth in Lent, *Laetare* (meaning rejoice), or Mothering Sunday. And the liturgical colour is rose. Mothering Sunday is the title that appeals to me most, it gives us a reason to rejoice. Various countries celebrate Mother's day on other dates. For Malta, Germany, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Chile and the USA, it is later, on the second Sunday of May. Spain is similar, on the first of May, *Día de la Madre*, at the start of Our Lady's month.

But here in the UK, and also in Nigeria and Ireland, Mothering Sunday is today. Only recently did it become a day to arrange a Moonpig card or flowers to be sent home. I suspect I am not the only one. And of course today is an opportunity to pray for mum. Originally, mothering Sunday meant something different. It used to be about returning to your Mother Church. That's the parish or Christian community of your homestead, perhaps where you were baptised. If you moved house, or came to Downside School, there may be more than one Church building you think of as mother. For many Old Gregorians, this basilica fits the bill, some of you were baptised or confirmed in this Church. In the case of Canon Thomas behind me, who stands with me at the altar each Sunday, he was ordained a priest in this Church in July 1969. Canon Thomas may be one of the only people in their true Mother Church today; I think I spot a couple of others, and please God, some others who will be baptised, confirmed and receive their first holy Communion, reborn in their Mother Church, in the coming months.

In the old days, each Mass had an introit rather than an opening hymn. The introit for today tells us about what Mother Church really means: *Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning; exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast.*

These words come from the prophet Isaiah and clearly point to the Church as Mother. Like our mothers feed us before and after birth, so Mother Church nourishes us with the grace of Christ. St Cyprian of Carthage, a third century Christian bishop, once said: *He cannot have God for his Father who does not have the Church for his mother.* The Father, through Mother Church feeds us with God's grace, even in this Mass today where we are fed with the Body and Blood of

Christ. I think the psalm is crucial for understanding Church as our mother. There are allusions to the sacraments of Mother Church in the 23rd psalm. *The Lord is my Shepherd there is nothing I shall want.* Here are the sacraments I spotted in today's and last Thursday's psalm: *Near restful waters he leads me; he revives my soul,* which Christians have long heard as an echo of baptism. *My head you have anointed with oil,* reminding us of confirmation. And the shepherd prepares a table where the cup overflows, a line that Christians have always recognised as a sign of the Eucharist.

I think the conclusion to the psalm points to the Church as the ordinary means of salvation, through the sacraments of Christ, when it says: *In the Lord's own house shall I dwell for length of days unending.*

The readings today deepen this picture of Mother Church and the life she gives. In the first reading Samuel learns something essential about the gift of faith. He looks at the strong and impressive sons of Jesse, yet God corrects him with a quiet truth that echoes through all of Scripture: "Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." The one chosen is David, the youngest, called in from the fields. Samuel anoints him with oil and the Spirit of the Lord comes upon him. That moment reminds us that God does not only call. He also gives grace for the task ahead. The Church continues this work when she anoints her children and strengthens them with the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel shows the same grace. Jesus heals the man born blind, slowly leading him to faith. At first the man knows that he was healed. In time he recognises Jesus, saying, *Lord, I believe.* Faith often grows like this, quietly and gradually, as Christ opens our eyes, and works wonders for us. And Mother Church is the place where that light is first given and patiently nourished. In Mother Church we are washed in baptism, strengthened by the Spirit, and fed at the Lord's table, as the shepherd in the psalm leads, anoints, and prepares a feast for his flock. Here, gradually, Christ opens our eyes and leads us from darkness into the light of faith.

Dear brothers and sisters, Mother Church is where that light is received and nourished, above all through the sacraments of Christ. Happy Mothering Sunday. *Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning; exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast.* Amen.