

## Isaiah 49:8-15 Mothering Sunday 11

After dinner one Mothering Sunday, a mother was washing dishes when her teenage daughter walked into the kitchen. Horrified to see her mother at the sink, she exclaimed, "O mum, you shouldn't have to do the dishes on Mother's Day." The mother was touched by this apparent thoughtfulness and was just about to take off her apron and hand it to her daughter when the girl added, "They'll keep till tomorrow."

Being a mother can be a pretty thankless task – I assume. You are expected to do everything, forget nothing and always be there for everyone. And if things do go wrong, well then – it's pretty much guaranteed to be your fault. It's no wonder that in places the Bible describes God in terms of a mother.

But, with the best will in the world, mothers are not the same as God, we need to accept that mothers need help, they need time off and they do sometimes (just occasionally) get it wrong. Chances are that perhaps we have too great an expectation when it comes to our mothers and so when they let us down by forgetting something we unreasonably feel aggrieved.

For example, take a look at verse 15 of our reading from Isaiah 49. God asks, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?" Instinctively we would want to answer "no", but the reality is that we know of situations where selfishness, neglect, misplaced love for a particular man, drugs, alcohol, 101 other possibilities and variables, even just personality mean that a mother could forget her baby, or that she could have no compassion towards her child.

Whilst many of us this morning would want to remember our mothers because they loved us and cared for us, we also need to recognise that there will be those whose mothers were not all that they could have been.

Possibly there will also be those here who carry a burden of guilt that they themselves have not behaved as they believe a mother should.

Today it is easy to look around at all the card shops and restaurants promoting a positive image of motherhood and fool ourselves into believing every mother (or every other mother) is perfect. So, it is good to have a realistic God, our God who knows that we are not always the people we should be, or even want to be, “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget,” God goes on, “I will not forget you!”

So God is realistic; he sets us up with the ideal picture we hold; Mums are always loving and caring, but then God says, “in a fallen and sinful world, you just might be being over idealistic, even a mother can do what you least expect – even a mother can walk away from her child or neglect it, but, in contrast, I will never forget about you.”

Now, this passage comes from a time when God’s people are in exile – they believed that they were special, blessed and loved by God and they were; God had told them that and they had experienced it. But as a result they had then taken God for granted.

In a way they had begun to behave like the teenager daughter in the story at the beginning; they looked like they loved God, but actually, they didn’t really, they were just out for what they could get from him whilst they did their own thing anyway.

So what does any good parent do? Well, one mother was telling me recently how her daughter had said, “This is my house, I can do what I like!” “OK,” replied the Mum, “so let’s have your half of the rent and phone bill and the gas and the electricity...”

A good mum sometimes needs to teach her children harsh lessons and what had happened in Isaiah’s day is that because his people had turned their backs on him, God had removed his favour from them and so they have been invaded by the surrounding nations and carted off into exile.

So have they been abandoned by God – that’s the big question of verse 14? Well, did that mum actually make her daughter pay all those bills, or throw her out? Of course not and these verses tell us that God has not abandoned his people either, because whilst it is possible for a mother to forget about or even abandon her child, but God will never forget the people he loves.

I was talking to another mother this week whose son had gone out to play, but then gone off somewhere else and not come home when expected. Of course his mum had been frantic with worry, going out looking for him and even calling the police. Happily in the end he just rolled home, totally unaware of all the stress he had put everyone through, but it had been stressful because loving mothers want their children to be with them safe and sound.

Perhaps the best known example in the media over the last couple of years of parents who will not forget their lost child are Kate and Gerry McCann, a couple who never seem to waver in their mission to find their daughter Madeline.

And God is like that kind of parent, he tells us that he will never forget his children, or abandon them. He promises to rescue them and to save them.

And that's why Paul, in the New Testament quotes verse 8 from this reading and says that it has been fulfilled.

You see, just as the shops and restaurants have had their posters up since at least Valentine's Day advertising the coming of Mothering Sunday (or Mother's Day as they call it) these verses point ahead to the coming of Jesus when those in darkness will be free, when the afflicted will be comforted and when many will come from afar into God's presence. It was Jesus' manifesto when he spoke in the synagogue at Nazareth, because, quoting from a different passage in Isaiah, he declared;

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.’

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:18-21)

Isn't that great news? God has not forgotten about us! Isaiah was pointing ahead to Jesus; how he would come to rescue us and bring us back to God (as we have been hearing over the last few weeks whilst we have been looking at Exodus) and then Paul points us back to Jesus declaring, “I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.” – we're living in it – now!

Listen, we all forget things at times, maybe you have sat there this morning with the growing, terrible feeling that you have forgotten Mothering Sunday, that you never got round to buying a card and now it's too late!

But how great it is to know that no matter how forgetful we are, no matter how good or bad we are, that despite the fact that none of us (even the most brilliant mum) doesn't reach the ideal standard of humanity – God has not forgotten us. God knows us, he loves us, he remembers us and he will have compassion on us because he has rescued us and saved us through Jesus. Jesus has come and taken the dirty apron of our lives off us and he has cleaned away all the messes that we have made and washed us clean from the sin which separates us from God, simply because he loves us as his children.