

# Collect, Readings and Reflection for 15 March 2026, the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, Mothering Sunday

## **Collect** (*the Church's prayer for today*):

God of compassion,  
whose Son Jesus Christ, the child of Mary,  
shared the life of a home in Nazareth,  
and on the cross drew the whole human family  
to himself:  
strengthen us in our daily living  
that in joy and in sorrow  
we may know the power of your presence  
to bind together and to heal;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.  
Amen

God of love,  
passionate and strong,  
tender and careful:  
watch over us and hold us  
all the days of our life;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen

## **Readings: Exodus 2:1-10; Luke 2:33-35**

*Today's reflection is by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Cain.*

## **Holy Ground**

Preaching is always to be approached with humility and care; perhaps never more so on a Sunday like today, Mothering Sunday. In our tradition this was the day to return to worship at your mother church, the place where you were baptised and first nurtured in faith. In more recent times, the church has absorbed the secular and originally American custom of celebrating mothers and motherhood. And there is nothing wrong with that — except, perhaps, the subtle pressure to adopt a greetings card simplicity that doesn't quite ring true. I stand here this morning acutely aware of the complexity of experiences and emotions that gather around this day. We are, in many ways, on holy ground.

I want to begin with a story.

It is the story of a woman named Mervat Mardini, mother of three daughters — Sara, Yusra and Shahed. Until 2015, Mervat lived with her husband Ezzat and their children in Damascus. Her elder daughters were competitive swimmers, and from a young age Yusra had nurtured a realistic hope of representing Syria at the Olympic Games. That hope was shaken in 2011 when peaceful demonstrations against the government of Bashar al Assad descended into violence and civil war. Yusra was just thirteen. The family remained in Damascus as the conflict intensified and daily life became increasingly precarious. In early 2015, a mortar shell landed in a swimming pool during one of Yusra's competitions. It was then that Mervat realised the family had to act.

Their decision was heartbreaking: to send Yusra, now seventeen, together with her sister Sara and their cousin Nizar, on the perilous journey to Europe. Their destination was Berlin, where distant relatives might offer a foothold. The parting was full of tears, but Mervat knew she had to let her daughters go.

The journey included a crossing of the Aegean Sea in an overcrowded, patched up inflatable boat. When the engine failed and panic spread, Sara and Yusra jumped into the water and swam for three and a half hours, towing the boat to safety on the island of Lesbos. Their story is told in the 2022 film *The Swimmers*. I will leave the rest for you to discover, except to say that the family is now reunited in Berlin.

Mervat did not see her daughters step into that boat, but her story has clear echoes of another mother who placed her child on the water. Jochebed, the mother of Moses, set her son afloat on the Nile in the hope that he might escape the violence of Pharaoh. Mervat, facing a Pharaoh of our own time — the brutality of civil war — made a similarly wrenching decision. Both women acted out of a love that was willing to let go, even when letting go felt like a kind of tearing.

These stories remind us that motherhood, in all its forms, carries within it the pain of separation and the sacrifice of release. And they remind us, too, that love often asks of us things we would never have chosen yet somehow find the strength to do.

When we turn to our gospel reading, we meet Simeon — a man who has waited his whole life for God's promise to be fulfilled. When he takes the infant Jesus into his arms, he recognises in this tiny child the hope of Israel and the light of the nations. Yet his words to Mary are not only words of blessing. They carry a quiet, piercing truth: "A sword will pierce your own soul too."

Simeon sees what Mary cannot yet see — that love, even divine love, will not shield her from pain. Scripture never offers us a sentimental picture of motherhood. Instead, it gives us something far more honest: a vocation woven through with joy and vulnerability, with promise and risk, with moments of deep connection and moments of aching distance.

Even the beginning of life reflects this paradox. Conception is a mystery in which God is intimately involved; every child bears the imprint of God's image. Yet from the moment of birth, the cord is cut. A first separation. A first invitation to trust. And God knows this dynamic intimately. God desires his children to flourish, to grow, to remain close — yet God does not hold us tightly for his own sake. He allows us freedom, even when that freedom leads us into danger or distance.

If motherhood is, at its heart, about nurturing life, then it is not confined to women, nor only to those who have given birth. It is a calling that touches all of us whenever we help another person to grow, whenever we create space for someone else's flourishing, whenever we love in ways that may one day require us to step back. Simeon models this beautifully. Having held the Christ child, he is able to release him, to bless him, to trust God with him, and to find peace in that letting go.

There is something in that moment which speaks quietly into our own lives. These stories — of Jochebed, of Mervat, of Mary — touch on the tenderness and the cost of loving, on the courage it takes to nurture life, and on the ache that comes when we must release what we cherish. They open up places in us that are sometimes joyful, sometimes painful, often both at once.

So, before we go any further, I'd like to invite us into a short silence.

A silence in which we can simply rest before God, bringing whatever this day stirs in us — the memories we treasure, the questions we carry, the longings we hardly name.

[Silence]

May God meet us in the stillness and hold whatever we have placed in his hands.

And so today, as we reflect on stories like Mervat's and Jochebed's and Mary's, we also hold the stories that sit quietly among us. Some of us come with gratitude for mothers who nurtured us; others carry grief for mothers who are no longer here. Some hold memories that are complicated or painful. Some carry the ache of longing — for children hoped for but not yet born, for relationships strained or broken, for losses that still feel raw. Some are navigating the slow, bewildering work of letting go — letting go of children who are growing up, or growing distant, or growing into lives we cannot quite understand.

Mothering Sunday gathers all of this together. It refuses to flatten our experience into something simple. Instead, it invites us to honour the fullness of what it means to love and to be loved, to hold on and to let go, to rejoice and to grieve — sometimes all at once.

And amid this complexity, God is not distant. God is not watching from the sidelines. God is present in the tenderness of those who nurture us, in the courage of those who release us, in the quiet strength of those who carry us in prayer, in the resilience of those who keep loving even when love is costly. God is present in the spaces between us — in the longing, the hope, the ache, the joy.

In the story of Moses, in the courage of Mervat, in the faithfulness of Mary, we see that love is never passive. It is active, brave, and often costly. It is willing to release what it cherishes most, trusting that God can hold what we cannot. And in Jesus — the child Mary raised, the Saviour she entrusted to God's purposes — we see that love is also redemptive. It carries wounds, yet it brings life. It bears the weight of separation, yet it opens the way to hope.

Whatever our own experience of motherhood or of being mothered, God gathers us today. God gathers our joy and our sorrow, our longing and our gratitude, our memories and our hopes. And in that gathering, God holds us with a tenderness that does not deny the complexity of our stories but honours them.

May we trust that the God who mothers us is faithful.  
May we trust that love — real love, costly love — is never wasted.  
And may we trust that, even in the ambiguity of this day, love endures.  
Amen.

S⊕ JAMES WOODSIDE  
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