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4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent - Mothering Sunday

*May I speak in the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*

In 2021, the Channel 4 drama *It's A Sin*, written by Russell T Davies was first broadcast. If you've not seen it, I apologise in advance because I'm going to reveal a few spoilers! Set in London between 1981 and 1991, it depicts the lives of a group of gay men and their friends in their twenties living and loving fiercely during the HIV/AIDS crisis. It's a beautiful and heartbreaking story, and although the characters may be fictional, the experiences that are depicted are all true, they are all holy, and it's important we listen and never let them drift into a history left long forgotten.

I'm not going to talk about HIV or Section 28 or important moments of LGBTQ+ social history in the 80s and 90s today, as interesting as that may be. Instead, my primary focus is what I suggest is the central underlying theme of both *It's A Sin* and this morning's readings from Scripture - belonging in a chosen family.

Families come in all shapes and sizes, we love them, hate them, are ambivalent towards them, need to leave them, need to find them. We are all born, some way or another into a biological family with an inherited set of cultural and social expectations of what that looks like. However, we know that often the reality is far from the idealised image projected to us. When things don't quite fit the presumed *status quo*, for whatever reason, this can cause all sorts of shame, secrets, fear, and problems, and for a season or for a lifetime, our biological family may not be the people that help us belong. This is all too true and acute for LGBTQ+ people, especially if you happened to be out in the 80s and 90s but also for Moses in our Exodus reading and for Jesus and his disciples. In both scriptural passages, the mothers of Moses and Jesus

appear fleetingly, and yet provide an important insight into what it means to belong when we also have to let go.

In John's Gospel, Mother Mary only appears twice, the first time at the Wedding in Cana, where it is said Jesus begins his ministry, and the second, at the foot of the cross, the end of Jesus' earthly ministry where we meet our Gospel story today. This relationship, and the limited storytelling we have about it in John feels complicated and perhaps not all that outwardly loving. I wonder whether like me you felt a little jolt when Jesus refers to his mother in his last breaths as *woman!* I don't know about you, but I certainly would never get away with speaking to anyone, let alone my mother like that!

Although a lot of scholars interpret this incident, specifically when Jesus *hands over* his mother to the beloved disciple as symbolically joining the church (as woman) to God (as man), with Mary thus becoming the spiritual mother of the church and therefore us all; this traditional view is not without its faults or failings, in fact, I don't really think it's all that helpful. I wonder instead, what this passage of scripture can reveal to us if we read between the lines, if our focus instead is not about the practical ordering of a 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian family structure but on the spiritual and universal function, where family is much more than it seems? We know in John 19:25, that as well as Mary his mother and the 'disciple who he loved' being at the foot of the cross there were 3 other women present: Mary Magdalene, Mary wife of Clopas, and his aunt. A small group of friends, a small group of family witnessing to the horrific trauma of seeing their beloved son, friend, companion, hung up to die. It's a small but very intimate and profound scene where I think Jesus' mother and the Beloved Disciple (who is now Jesus' brother) become models for Jesus' true family of disciples and where the women around them become the witnesses to that transition. This is the revelation that family is not just about physical blood relationships but a new life together, where we actively choose each other witnessed through the unerring love of Christ. As Christians we understand God as Trinitarian - three in one, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If this is true, it means the whole cosmos is predicated on a diverse and holy community. If we bear the image of God, that means we bear the image of a multitude. And that to bear the image of God in its fullness, we need each other. Maybe

every culture, every household, every community bears that image in a unique way...maybe that's what Christ crucified is re-orientating us to.

When gay and bisexual men were dying in horrific numbers in the HIV/AIDS crisis they were often ostracised by their biological or birth families as well as in wider society and the media. However, as the character of Jill in *It's a Sin* encapsulates throughout each episode, these men were not left alone, for there were incredible wonderful women, often lesbians or queer women themselves who took them in, cared for them, and galvanised them for battles to come. If you remember the HIV/AIDS crisis, you'll know that there were all sorts of fears about how you could contract HIV, from kissing to holding hands to just being around a gay man. All unfounded, all deeply damaging.

Small communities, support groups, flatmates, work colleagues, AIDS wards in hospitals often became places of sanctuary and kindness from this kind of ostracization and prejudice, where chosen or logical families could be created, adopting a kind of love and tenderness that I think Jesus calls the beloved disciple to in caring for his mother, looking outwards to all be links in the chain where our individual flourishing is dependent on the collective. The kind of love that is modelled on the cross is the love that even in the most desperate and grief-stricken of situations shines forth and ensures that no-one is alone. This is the kind of love that calls us to follow Jesus and look for where we can help ourselves, help others to know that they, we, belong.

Of course, It's not always as simple as that. I'm not saying that a chosen family is perfect and far superior to a biological one, because all families, all relationships, all friendships take work, and this is where our reading from Colossians can help and encourage us. As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved (which by the way includes every one of us) we are called to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. We are called to forgive, to live with peace in our hearts, and fundamentally to love in a way which binds 'everything together in perfect harmony' (3.14). This is the kind of belonging that *It's A Sin* and our readings demonstrate, not a belonging that is easy or able to just happen, not a belonging that ignores the ups and downs, the joys and sorrows of life, not a belonging that judges, holds resentments, is conditional and asks us to be shadows of ourselves. Instead, our

belonging is rooted in being who God calls us to be, rooted in authentic love that can be nurtured in our hearts, souls and bodies and shared freely. It's the kind of love that takes people in, wraps them up, loves them until they can love themselves, and is with them every step of the way. It's the kind of love that Jill embodies as she watches her friends die, never leaving their side, touching them when no-one else would, the kind of love that the LGBTQ+ community had for each other during the hardest of times, the kind of love that Paul is desperately trying to articulate in his letter to the Colossians, that Moses' mother demonstrates when she puts her tiny newborn baby in a basket knowing he'll be safer on water than on land, and the kind of love that Jesus pours out abundantly on the cross.

This Mothering Sunday, my prayer for us all is that we can continue to find where we belong, where we can meet each other and witness to each other's stories, finding ways of creating chosen families of love and connection, and learning to be mother's to each other clothed with compassion, kindness, love, and patience, which we can always practice again, and again, and again.

Amen.