

# CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	15 March 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Fourth Sunday of Lent / Mothering Sunday
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

We hear a lot at this time of year about 'Mothers' Day' but in the Church today – the fourth Sunday of Lent – is 'Mothering Sunday'. Although it's certainly a battle to try and hold on to that term, I think there are some important differences. Perhaps the main one is that Mothering Sunday has a crucial dimension to it that the secular Mothers' Day does not. Yes, we do today honour all those who have been called to be mothers, including our own mothers, for the love and devotion they have given. But Mothering Sunday also honours Mary, as the mother of Jesus and, by extension of all Christians.

The foundation of this is in today's gospel when Jesus from the cross says to his mother: 'behold your son' and to John, his beloved disciple, 'behold your mother'. He is, as it were, giving Mary to be the mother of his disciples; of his Church.

It is often thought that when it comes to devotion to Mary, there is a clear and simple distinction: that Roman Catholics honour and venerate Mary whilst Anglicans and Protestants do not. But whilst this distinction may be clear and simple, it is also completely wrong. As Anglicans, we habitually look for inspiration and guidance to the early centuries of the Christian Church. In these, it was quite clear that Mary was honoured as the mother of God. She was often described as the *Theotokos*: the God-bearer. Go into most Anglican churches, including Chichester Cathedral, and you will find a Lady Chapel which is specially dedicated to Mary – to Our Lady,

hence its name. Look at the calendar of feasts in the Book of Common Prayer and you will find several dedicated to Mary: her purification on 2 February; the annunciation by Gabriel to Mary on 25 March – nine months before Christmas; her Nativity on 8 September and her Visitation to Elizabeth on 2 July. Look at what we're often told is the most popular service in the Church of England: choral Evensong – it has Mary's song, the *Magnificat*, right at the centre of it. Look at so many of our hymns and Christmas carols in which Mary is honoured in a multitude of ways: 'O higher than the cherubim, more glorious than the seraphim'; 'Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ her little child'.

Having said this, Anglicans *have* traditionally been wary of teaching about Mary becoming over-defined when it might have been better for them to be left somewhat mysterious. In this respect, we can think of Church teaching about the end of Our Lady's life. There's a beautiful hymn about her by the seventeenth century Bishop of Bath and Wells, Thomas Ken. In the final verse, he writes,

Heaven with transcendent joys her entrance graced,  
Next to his throne her son his Mother placed;  
And here below, now she's of heaven possessed,  
All generations are to call her blessed.

We can see that this gives wholehearted assent to the belief that, at death, Mary went to be reunited with her son in the joy of heaven. And that, therefore, all succeeding generations should revere her. But what Anglicans (as well as others such as the members of the Eastern Orthodox churches) have questioned is the way in which Roman Catholic teaching has in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries defined very precisely the exact way in which, at the end of her earthly life, Mary was taken body and soul upwards into the life of heaven. Although happy with the belief that Mary *has* been taken into the joy of heaven, Anglicans have not believed that all the faithful should be required to subscribe to a precise understanding

of *how that event happened* when such an understanding is not stated in the Bible or the Creed.

Similarly, Anglicans have had reservations about some of the more *inflated* ways of describing Mary. One of these is the use of the term *co-redemptrix*, a term that implies that Mary herself, alongside Christ, brings us redemption. It is an interesting point of ecumenical convergence that the dicastery (or department) for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome last year published a document entitled *Mater Populi Fidelis – Mother of the Faithful People of God*. The dicastery explicitly seeks to *correct* what it, like the Anglican tradition, sees as over-inflated language about Mary. Mary does indeed, the document teaches, *cooperate* in a supreme way with the work of salvation in bringing Christ into the world. But it is, they say, unhelpful and inaccurate to describe her as *co-redemptrix* because this eclipses the role of Jesus Christ. 'As the *handmaid* of the Lord (Luke 1.38), Mary *directs us to Christ* and asks us to "do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2.5)'.

Another point of contention is the way in which Mary has been depicted in some types of Christian art, which can often be in a rather soupy and sentimentalised way. Feminist commentators have argued that Mary is often seen as someone who was completely submissive: as somebody who simply did what she was told unquestioningly. The argument has been that this gives rise to – or at least reinforces – a view that women should always be submissive and subservient.

But this is clearly not true to the biblical depiction of Mary in which it is clear that she had extraordinary determination and strength to accept the unique mission of bringing Christ into the world; that she showed this strength as she was with Jesus her son through life and death on the cross, and when she was gathered together with the disciples at the very beginning of the Church.

And there are certainly images of Mary which, unlike the more sentimental ones, reflect this strength. There's a wonderful picture I once came across of Mary as the Virgin of Guadalupe in which she is shown giving a full-on Karate kick in defence of the rights of Chicanos: Mexicans living in the United States. That may feel a bit too dissonant, but the images of Mary that speak most strongly to many of us are the ones that show not submission and sentimentality, but serenity and strength, as Mary, with motherly care directs us towards Jesus her son. In the words of Bob Chilcott's wonderful Shepherd's Carol:

And so we have come, Lady,  
Our day's work done,  
Our love, our hopes, ourselves,  
We give to your son.

So as on this Mothering Sunday, as we give thanks for our own mothers, wherever they may be and pray for all who are entrusted with this gift and responsibility, so may we also remember that on the cross Jesus has given us the gift of his mother to be ours also, to take her into our lives and into our homes.