

God is rich in mercy.

Three tales of Mothering for this Mothering Sunday.

The first features a little boy
whose mother sadly died when he was just three.
His dad quickly remarried,
an 18-year-old who was soon pregnant.
A four year old boy missing his mum
proved too much for her to cope with on top of everything else,
and she started taking it out of him,
pushing him into a cupboard,
beating him black and blue,
culminating in the little boy's arm being broken.
The NSPCC took the case to court
and the boy's step-mother faced a long custodial sentence.

And then something unexpected happened.
At a pre-hearing the boy's grandmother intervened,
and made a plea bargain with the judge.
The deal was that the boy's father and stepmother
would move out of town,
and that the grandmother would adopt the boy
and bring him up as her own child,
calming him, soothing his nightmares,
making him whole.

The year was 1933.
The judge agreed to the adoption,
and the grandmother proved more than true to her word.
She raised him,
cherished him,
took him to the newly built church
in the heart of their council estate,
which became a second home to him.
The church made a fuss
of this blond-haired blue-eyed cherub,
as time went on he joined the choir,
became a server,
a thurifer.
It was a very high church
with a strong devotion to the Virgin Mary,
and in the boy's mind and life
the gentle and kind mother of our Lord
proved a wonderful substitute for the mother he had lost.

He left school at 14 and worked in an office,
but his heart's desire was to be a priest.

Unthinkable really
for a beaten-up little lad from a council estate.
But the lad believed in Jesus who said,
'What is impossible for man
is possible for God.'
It took a long time,
but he got there,
ordained at the age of 33.
At his ordination the parish of his boyhood
which had nurtured and formed him as a person and priest
presented him with a passion-red stole.
Here is the stole:
my father's stole because this is my father's story.

A couple of years on
we find him a parish priest in the Hull docklands,
also chaplain to the local Maternity Hospital,
a Humberside version of *Call the Midwife*.
Late November 1963,
late into the most stormy of nights,
my dad is called out
to baptise a prem baby,
a farmer's daughter from South Holderness
born on the farmhouse kitchen floor
two months too soon and just two pounds in weight.
The little baby is dying and won't last the night,
so my dad cycles out to baptise her,
with his robes in his rucksack
and the heavy lorries from the docks overtaking him,
drenching him with spray.
He'd look a sorry, sodden figure
as he wearily walked into the matron's office:
yet the epitome of priesthood.
The matron accompanied my dad to the ward
and he baptised the little girl,
using a kidney dish as a font,
the matron and the ward sister looking on.
My dad held the tiny, tiny baby in one hand,
the tiniest of hands, the tiniest of legs,
the tiniest of features:
'I baptize you in the name of the Father
and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'
And as the water ran down that tiniest face,
a tiny tongue came out of a tiny mouth
and licked the drops.

'That child's not going to die – she's a survivor,'
Matron blurted out,

taking the sacred baptism liturgy
in a somewhat novel direction.
'Sister, call Mr Stokes out,'
she commanded.
'But, he'll be in bed my now, Matron.
I don't want to disturb him without good reason.'
'Call him out!'
Matron boomed, rising to her full height.
In full flight she would have put the fear of God into God.

The consultant was duly awoken,
examined the child
and decided life was worth a shot.
The little one was placed in a shoe box,
cocooned in cotton wool,
with the hospital janitor,
a veritable Heath Robinson
fixing a light bulb to the lid to keep her warm.

One year later,
late November 1964,
there was a knock on our door,
On the doorstep stood a ruddy faced farmer,
his ruddy faced wife
holding their ruddy faced one year old daughter,
a strapping lass,
brought to life by baptism.

Fast forward 23 years.
It's me who's ordained now,
but again ministry focuses on a baby.
Sadly a dead baby,
a prem baby boy born at 25 weeks
who died in his mother's arms
as her husband looked helplessly on
just minutes before medical help arrived.
I had come across the couple before,
I'd baptised their first child,
they were very pleasant,
very civil,
but I didn't feel I'd made much connection with them.
If conversation didn't come easily then,
then it certainly wouldn't now.

But even so, I felt compelled to go and see them,
simply because I was so utterly sorry for them.
The searing grief of bereavement is compounded
by people giving you a wide berth,

simply because they don't know what to say,
especially when you lose a child.
I didn't know what to say either,
but I knew I had to be there.
So after Evensong one September Sunday night
I detoured via their home.
My mother-in-law had been to Evensong with me,
and she sat outside in the car for hours, God bless her,
whilst I sat with them, listened to them,
held them in their grief.
In due course we had little boy's funeral.
I dug the grave myself to keep the costs at zero.
The father carried his son into church
in a little white coffin which he placed on the altar,
his wife and their two-year-old daughter by his side.
And that was the congregation.
It proved too much for the hardened undertaker
who had to leave us to our own devices.
I can't believe it now,
but we had a hymn,
All things bright and beautiful.
God knows how we sang it.
Ray, the boy's father,
played rugby for Castleford
so was used to bellowing out rugby songs.
Like Eric Morecombe
he could manage the right notes
but not necessarily in the right order.
But somehow we managed the hymn,
we managed the sorriest of funerals,
and we shook hands at the church gates
and they walked away.

Or rather, they didn't.
I saw a lot of them in those next few weeks,
I was always popping in.
And as weeks turned to months
Ray and his wife Sue
got confirmed.
Six months later Ray became my churchwarden,
and this hard-talking Yorkshire businessman
woke up my sleepy parish
and proved my right hand man.
A year later it was one the greatest privileges of my ministry
to visit Sue in Leeds General Infirmary
after she was safely delivered
of a beautiful baby boy.

Three tales of Mothering.
Each of them featuring a real mother,
but also each of them teeming with people
who didn't bear the name mother
but proved fantastic at mothering,
surprising even themselves.
All the stories have Mother Church in common.
In fact without the Church
there would be no stories whatsoever.
Flashback to 1926
a Church Council Meeting
at Chesterfield Parish Church,
the crooked spire,
discussing building a new church
in the council estate out of town.
'We can't possibly afford to do that,'
someone objects.
'Britain's all but bankrupt after the Great War.
We've been paralysed by the General Strike.
Building a new church is madness.
We ought to be saving money,
cutting down on clergy,
cutting down on church buildings,
not launching new ones.'

Such a plausible argument,
sadly heard so often in these more profligate days.
In 1929 no St Augustine's Church
is opened in the Council Estate
where my father was born.
No grandmother is encouraged by that Church
to play the SyroPhonician woman of Gospel fame
and challenge the inevitable.
No church is there to nourish my dad
from terror to trust.
No church is there to form his vocation.
No ordination, no stole,
no baby brought back from the brink,
no grieving parents comforted.
Such a plausible parallel universe.
As we cease church activities
to stop the spread of the wretched Coronavirus,
it is only for the duration,
because we are no less than the Body of Christ
and coming together we can do such great things.

God is rich in mercy,
St Paul tells the Ephesians,

St Paul tells us.

Whether we match God's riches
with our riches or our mean-ness is up to us.
God has offered to us life in all its fullness;
what can we offer in return
but ourselves in all our totality?

*Now thank we all our God,
With hearts and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In whom his world rejoices.
Who from our mother's arms
Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours today.*