

Mothering Sunday/ Mother's Day

(4th Sunday in Lent)

What happens?

As soon as Valentine's Day is over florists and card shops begin to advertise Mother's Day. Gifts, especially of flowers, houseplants and chocolates, are promoted throughout the high street. Primary school children are encouraged to make cards or craft items to take home to their mothers. Many send a greetings card to their mothers. In churches, Mothering Sunday services are held to give thanks and pray for mothers and family life. Often during such services little posies of spring flowers, especially daffodils, are handed out to children for their mothers.

Background

Today's customs are in fact a hybrid between the ancient, mid Lent* festival of Mothering Sunday and a celebration of motherhood imported from the US.

In mediaeval times, the 4th Sunday in Lent called for a relaxation in the time of abstinence, in honour of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, which is the gospel reading on that day in the Book of Common Prayer. It could be that the association with motherhood may have come from the custom of visiting cathedrals or 'the mother church' on this day. The earliest records we have of the day as a family celebration come from the mid 17th century. It was taken as a holiday for children living away from home - servant girls and apprentices. They travelled home to share a meal with their own families, often bringing a small gift. Typically daughters would make a simnel cake (from 'simila' meaning fine flour), perhaps to show the baking skills they were learning. Such observance of Mothering Sunday reached a peak in Victorian times but then declined so that by the Second World War the custom was dying out. However, with the arrival of many American GIs stationed in Britain at this time, the native custom was injected with new life. These young service men followed their own distinct custom of Mother's Day, introduced by Anna Jarvis of Pennsylvania. In 1907 she had suggested an annual day to remember mothers. The idea caught on and Mother's Day is celebrated in the US and many other countries on the second Sunday in May. Today we owe the cards and the name Mother's Day to America but the mid Lent date and church services are home grown.

*see the discussion on Shrove Tuesday for a description of Lent

Further reading from *The Customs and Ceremonies of Britain*, by Charles Kightly, (Thames & Hudson) which may be available in your local library.

See also www.englishculture.allinfoabout.com.

The Simnel Cake

This seems to have a number of variants, but the most familiar recipe is that of a spicy fruit cake with a layer of almond paste (marzipan) baked in the middle. A further layer of almond paste is laid on the top and decorated with eleven balls of paste, representing all the apostles except Judas. The cake is then placed under a hot grill for a short time until the almond paste begins to brown. Decorations of flowers such as violets or primroses are also traditional. Although originally given on Mothering Sunday, because it was luxury food, the cake could not be eaten until Easter. If the cake had retained its moistness and flavour, the giver was considered a good cook!

Using Mother's Day for social events

Probably using this custom works best in groups for international wives. Yet everyone has a mother, and some of the ideas mentioned below could have wider appeal. In each case you will probably want to explain the origins of the custom and why we British celebrate mothers in March and not in May like most other countries!

Using crafts

If you need any excuse to make home made cards, arrange flowers or bake or decorate cakes, then Mother's Day provides one. It is a natural opportunity for sharing creative interests which do not depend on a good grasp of language. Use it to build relationships and community!

Point to Easter

As with Shrove Tuesday, you could use Mothering Sunday to introduce the idea of Lent and talk about preparation for Easter. A Simnel cake, with its eleven apostles, could be a prompt for finding out about the Easter story.

A woman's role

In a women only group you could use the occasion to find out from one another how women and mothers are viewed in different societies. Education of girls, styles of child rearing, health, ideas of beauty, expectations in marriage and extended family are all issues worth exploring sensitively, perhaps in small groups or pairs. You could then compare with some of the Biblical teaching on women or mothers, or look at Jesus' revolutionary attitude to women. As you prepare, think carefully about how much Western culture is influenced by secular feminism compared with biblical values. Be prepared to be non judgemental when discovering the attitudes of international friends!

If you have created a place where women feel safe and accepted this kind of discussion can promote real depth in relationships as you touch on deeply felt needs and concerns. Offers to pray about particular struggles your friends face may be genuinely welcomed, even if they are not Christians. Expect answers!

What my mother taught me

A more light hearted approach might be to share some of the things our mothers thought important to tell us. Did they always give us the nicest food or make us eat our greens? Does eating crusts make your hair curl? If British children are told 'Elbows off the table', what are other nationalities told about table manners? Perhaps someone with a Christian mother can set the ball rolling by describing similar every day examples, but also introduce the fact that their mother read them Bible stories or took them to Sunday school.

Using personal stories

Is there someone in your church who has a thought provoking testimony about motherhood? Perhaps she has faced raising a child with special needs and can describe how God and the church family helped. Perhaps she has faced miscarriage or stillbirth. Maybe there is a story about adoption – either as an adopted child or as a mother who has adopted. Perhaps she has faced

taking her family to live for a while in a very different country. You may be able to find other examples. Such personal stories resonate with everyone and can be a powerful testimony of the love of God and His care for the vulnerable.