Lent 4 Mothering Sunday

Some of us here will perhaps have been fans of Downton Abbey, that lovely story about an aristocratic family living in North Yorkshire in the early 1900's and into the Second World War. It was all make believe, but it had an accurate eye for detail. That's probably why we found it fascinating.

You will, I'm sure, remember Mrs Patmore. She was head cook, but she got it into her head that whilst she ruled the roost in the kitchen she could also interfere upstairs. Carson, the eminent and unflappable butler, and Mrs Hughes, the housekeeper, didn't go along with that one, and the battle lines were drawn. But there was a lovely side to Mrs Patmore. She had a strong feel for the younger ones downstairs and especially for her help, Daisy, the kitchen maid. Daisy seemed to work all the hours God sent, but Mrs Patmore was really very fond of her. That's why she was given the day off on Mothering Sunday, packed up with a huge supply of Simnel cake and other delicacies, and sent off to an elderly aunt who had brought her up. I like that. There was more to Mrs Patmore than you might think.

She felt for those Mums whose daughters worked away in service, and she felt for the girls who worked hard and probably missed home comforts.

The Church at that time was very aware of the problems of young girls in service, working away from home. It tried its best to show care and concern for them. I can remember as a boy that our parish in Sunderland had a large branch of an organisation called The Girls’ Friendly Society. It had a hostel for young girls and women living away from home, and it ran weekly social occasions for girls in service. Older women in the parish used to befriend them, invite them to family gatherings, and generally keep an eye on their welfare. I remember that well because my Mother was one of the befrienders and gave a lot of time to it. She roped in a number of my school friends to come to open social evenings in the parish hall. This was where we learned to dance with help from the girls, and play table tennis. It was all good fun, but I can't think that scenario would still work today.

In its day, the GFS provided a wonderful service. It was on the go when I arrived as a Bishop in Manchester, but within a few years it became outdated and faded.

That has always been the way in the church. It would rise to meet a special need. Make a big difference. And then it would be overtaken by some new problems. That was how one of its best organisations came into being - the Mothers' Union. **What better day to thank God for it than** o**n Mothering Sunday.**

Mary Sumner, who founded the Mothers' Union in 1876, would be surprised to know it is still going strong over 140 years later. It began in many of the poorer areas of the English dioceses. Its aim was to improve the lot of married women, to help home and family life to show God's love, and to encourage respect for all women.

That crucial work very quickly developed as the Anglican Church spread around the world. By the 1900s, the MU was well known in Canada, in Australia and New Zealand, and was beginning to reach into Africa. There was a huge amount to be done. Women were badly treated, they were worn down my manual work as well as running their homes, and large families often led to neglect. To change attitudes in countries overseas is never easy. The MU stood up against governments and local traditions. It set its stall out to improve family life, to change attitudes to women, and to give children a chance in life. All this was done within the context of Christian faith and love, and continues to be done today.

So today, thank God for all that the church has done to improve the lot of women and girls in the world. Remember the Mothers' Union.  Its 4 million members go on working to change gender attitudes, and improve the lot of women worldwide. They are the unsung heroines of today. They deserve our thanks. They ask for our prayers.

We, for our part, remember with gratitude all that our Mothers did for us.