

Because she was tired of living in London among clever people, Miss Rhoda Harting, a reserved yet moderately successful novelist in the thirty-third year of her age, retired during one November to a cottage in Buckinghamshire. Nor did she wish to marry.

"I dislike fuss, noise, worry, and all the other accidents, which, so my friends tell me, attend the married state," she said. "I like being alone. I like my work. Why should I marry?"

"You are unnatural, Rhoda," protested her friends.

"Possibly, but at least I am cheerful," retorted Miss Harting.

"Which," she added (but this was to herself), "is more than can be said of most of you."

So begins the delightful short story by Stella Gibbons, *The Little Christmas Tree* (1940). It is Christmas time so Rhoda buys herself the smallest Christmas tree she can find, begins to prepare the Christmas dinner which she plans to have in the privacy and solitude of her own company.

Then in the middle of preparing the chicken stuffing there came a knock at the door, which when she opened it, much to her astonishment, stood three children. The eldest, a girl in a red beret, said in a loud voice, 'We are very sorry to trouble you, but please may we take shelter in your house?' Rhoda is surprised but learns from the girl that they have a cruel step-mother who said they couldn't have a Christmas tree or presents, so they have fled their home, and found their way to Rhoda's home. So, to cut a short story shorter, Rhoda welcomes them in. Together they decorate the tree, they prepare Christmas dinner and Rhoda finds that something has changed within her. '[She] looked round at the three of them, blessing the chance that had brought them to her doorstep on Christmas morning.'

There is a twist to the story, but I'll come back to that later.

Today is Mothering Sunday, not Mothers' Sunday or Mothers' Day but mother-ing Sunday. Today we celebrate those women who do mother-ing by nurturing, caring for, protecting, educating and loving their own families and others in the community. Mother-ing in that sense is not limited to women, fathers may also mother, but there is a special bond between a woman and a child which Rhoda Harting discovered she had, even though the children were not hers and even though as she observed of her friends that mother-ing can sometimes be painful, exhausting and sometimes heart-breaking.

Perhaps it is for these reasons that from the very early days of Christianity, the Church has been described as a mother. For it is the Church as community which has the task of nurturing, caring for, protecting, educating and loving its immediate family of believers but also the wider community. In the Book of Revelation the mothering Church is described as the bride of Christ, the Lamb of God; God says, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb' (Rev 21:9).

Jesus said to his mother at the foot of the cross, 'Woman here is your son', and to his beloved disciple, he said, 'Here is your mother'. What a moment! Mary is going through the anguish of seeing her son die a terrible death, but she is commissioned by Jesus to a new

role as mother of the community after the crucifixion. We tend to think of Peter having that role when the risen Jesus said to him to feed his sheep because he was the rock on which the church would be built, but here it is Mary who is commissioned *before* the beloved disciple and *before* Peter. No wonder then, that women played such an important role in the life of the church communities; Paul names just a few of them at the end of his Letter to the Romans - Junia, Phoebe, Prisca, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Julia. Luke names many more in Acts of the Apostles – Lydia a business-women who was leader of a community of women, Tabitha, Priscilla, Candace, the queen of Ethiopia.

Even so, the Church has often singularly failed to live up to Mary's commission. For too long it has often been male dominated and controlled in ways which have lacked the mother-ing qualities which Jesus clearly showed in his own ministry and which he wanted the Church to continue after his death. Nevertheless, as Archbishop Justin Welby said recently, 'Even in its human weakness, the Church is still the bride of Christ' and it is slowly reforming itself.

So, what happened to Rhoda?

Having decorated the tree and eaten Christmas dinner, with darkness falling and with three sleepy contented children, there was a loud knock at the door. The children's father had found them. Rhoda quickly learnt that they did not have a wicked step-mother, and they had a large Christmas tree and presents waiting for them at home. The eldest child had invented it. Moreover, they had no mother, she had died in childbirth. The whole fantasy was because they wanted a mother. The father noticed Rhoda's ringless hand. Rhoda thought the father handsome. The story ends:

'Well,' said Rhoda, lightly, at last, 'Shall we go and see to the children?'

Prayer

For the mothering of mothers and the mothering of fathers and the mothering of others, we give you thanks. For those who nurse us through our pain; for all those who nurture, strengthen and guide us, and for the motherhood of the Church, Mother God, we give you thanks.

Amen