

Exodus 2:1-10 Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman,² and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months.³ But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket^(a) for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile.⁴ His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

⁵ Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it.⁶ She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said.

⁷ Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?"

⁸ "Yes, go," she answered. So the girl went and got the baby's mother.⁹ Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you." So the woman took the baby and nursed him.¹⁰ When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses,^(b) saying, "I drew him out of the water."

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort,⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.⁵ For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

Luke 2:33-35 The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him.³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against,³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Mothering Sunday:

Sarah has a friend, Brittany Meng, who does a regular podcast which she calls 'the motherhood metamorphosis', in which she talks about the changes and transitions that motherhood brings. In each episode she asks the question: 'complete the sentence: motherhood is...'. One of the recent replies was 'brutiful'.

I think that captures motherhood wonderfully. Motherhood is beautiful — what can rival bringing a new life into the world? Nurturing that fragile life from your breast? Teaching your child to sit, to stand, to walk and talk — instilling love into your child with each loving action, and coaxing love from that little one — the first smile, the first giggle, the hugs.

Motherhood is brutal — it begins on a wave of pain and exhaustion, and is followed by relentless sleep deprivation for at least the first two years, and often longer. You deal with wee, poo, snot and posset. You rejoice with every friendship and weep with every setback of your child. And your house won't be tidy until they move out.

Motherhood is brutiful.

The experience of Moses' mum was particularly brutiful. The Egyptian law said her newborn boy had to die. Brutal. She is determined not let this happen, and casts him on the river, in a basket, leaving him to God's care — beautiful. Pharaoh's daughter saves him and needs a wet-nurse — beautiful! He is taken to live in the palace — brutal. And so it goes.

Mary's experience is also brutifal — visited by an angel! Pregnant before marriage? A son who will provoke the rage and upset of both Romans and Jewish authorities? Crucifixion... Resurrection. Both brutal and beautiful.

Those who mother us invest so much love and care, as a rule. That depth of love brings its own reward, because the joy you have in your children is so great — but if suffering or setback come, these are so painful too.

The brutal aspects of life can push us to get thick-skinned and put our feelings away, deep where they cannot be harmed. We become tough. But tough is rarely tender. Loving our children requires vulnerability, or rather, love makes us vulnerable. But it is this love that allows us to respond to the beautiful, to notice and care. Motherhood, parenthood, pulls you in two directions, towards toughness *and* tenderness. How can we be both?

The Church Fathers were much influenced by Plato and argued that God was *impassible* — that God could not suffer nor feel pain, because for God to be affected by anything would alter God's state of perfection. We might call this a 'Tough God' theory.

Martin Luther argued against this at the beginning of the reformation, and in my lifetime theological orthodoxy has taken quite the opposite view — God's love must include the capacity to suffer with compassion, because of the death of his son on the cross, and because of the suffering of humanity under the weight of sin. We might call this a 'Tender God' theory. Paul, in 2 Corinthians speaks of God being the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. I hear Paul siding with that 'Tender God' view.

In the cross and the resurrection Jesus experienced both poles of the brutifal. In the brutal he did not become brutalised — instead this became in him our source of all compassion. There was a deep strength in his tenderness — and it is this strength that can strengthen us.

When we endure the brutal, because of love we may find — through God, in prayer — the strength to endure without being brutalised: taking the hardness of life to God and finding compassion and comfort. In the beautiful in life we can take this to God and discover God's delight, which only serves to increase our own, to deepen the wells of our love and more fully enrich our lives.

Mothers in particular, because of the closeness of their bond to their children, find their experience to be brutifal. But all of us find life to be so, to some extent. As we think particularly of motherhood today, let us firstly think what practical support we can give — especially to new mothers, to support them in the brutal, and enhance the beautiful. And also let us remember always to come to God in prayer — in both the beautiful with thanks, and the brutal with honesty, to find the compassion, comfort and love to make the most of the life in all its fullness that God wishes for us.

Amen.