Today marks the middle of Lent, a day the church calls Laetare Sunday or Refreshment Sunday – a chance to pause in the solemnity of the season, to catch our breath and to be revived. Laetare is the latin word for ‘Rejoice’ – and it’s a reminder that in 21 days’ time we will be ringing our bells and lighting the Easter candle in celebration of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, and the moment when everything changed.

But for now, we are at the halfway point. And we are in need of refreshment. Today, also marks what is traditionally known as Mothering Sunday – which was originally less about mothers and more about church!

In the 16th Century it was a day off work, a time of refreshment, when servants were invited to make a journey to their ‘mother’ church. This might have been their home church, their nearest cathedral or a major parish church in a bigger town. The service which took place at the ‘mother’ church symbolised the coming together of Christ’s family and would have been a significant journey for many.

I wonder whether your journey to church today felt significant? Or was it the same as every week? Was it part of your normal routine, or were you running late, trying to nip in before the 5 minute bells begin to toll?  
  
Our choice to make the journey to church is significant, whether its run of the mill or not, we make that decision to come to this place and to worship, to give thanks for all that is good, to ask for forgiveness where we make mistakes, and to be refreshed in God’s presence and by one another.

We are gathered here together in our ‘mother church’ by the Holy Spirit, in this place and as one family. We come home, to kneel before the altar and to receive rest and restoration.

But what does it mean to truly come home? In our Eucharistic prayer today, we see the image of God as a mother tenderly gathering her children into her arms. Jesus also uses the image of himself as a mother hen in Luke’s gospel, gathering her brood under her wings. There is a sense of being brought together in safety, sheltered and held, a place where shoulders can drop and breathing can become easier.

This is what it should mean to come home. I realise that for some of us our experience of coming home or of earthly mothering may not be as tender or protective as the images we see used here. But the church, Christ’s church is meant to be different.

We hear in Paul’s letter to the Colossians what coming home in church should look like. It should be a place clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. A place where burdens are shared, and forgiveness is given. A place where we are bound together by a Love that is greater than any we could possess or attempt on our own. Where truths are spoken in gentleness and wisdom is shared. And that each one of us plays a part in its becoming.

As the body of Christ in this mother church, Paul has given us a checklist for how we are to be together, and that united in our baptismal waters we belong to one another as we do to Christ.

The image of chicks nestled under a mother hen’s wings is an image of gathering, of community, and of intentional oneness. It requires a decision to return and to come home. To decide to be alongside one another in the challenges and joys of life, knowing that we are sheltered under the eternal arms of God who is both mother and father, and held in their embrace.

We see in our short gospel reading, that Jesus intends us to belong to one another. There are a few suggestions for when the church actually began – some say it was at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit breathed through the disciples – but today’s passage has also been put forward for the moment when it came to pass.

As Jesus hangs from the cross, he gathers his mother and his beloved disciple together in front of him, and he says, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he says to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. From that moment they are to belong to one another in Jesus’ name, making a daily decision to look after one another, to choose to do good for one another and to encourage one another in their remembrance of him.

Their belonging together is their refreshment. As is ours. Our decision to journey to our mother church today, to come home and to belong is God’s way of keeping us continually refreshed, through his Spirit moving in and amongst us. And through our commitment to him and to one another.

What Jesus the mother hen offers us is the fullness of his unguarded, open-hearted, wholly vulnerable self. What he gives us is his own body, his own life. Wings spread open, heart exposed, shade and warmth and shelter at the ready.  What he promises — at great risk to himself — is the making of his very being into a place of refuge and return for his children. So may we make that decision to belong to him and to one another, to come home into his arms today and be refreshed.

Amen.