

1 Samuel 7.3-12; Luke 18.1-8

There is something remarkably appropriate about the Mothers' Union picking two readings, one of drama and reliance on the intervention of God. And the other is one of Jesus's jokes, with a very sharp sting in it. It is appropriate to put these two together because the Mothers' Union is God-centred in a remarkable way. The Mothers' Union faces the most extreme odds that cannot be overcome except through the action of God. But also, contrary to the mockery and rumours and jokes about the Mothers' Union, it is so often a place of humour as well as of prayer, of laughter as well as of spiritual life.

Mary Sumner, of course, started the Mothers' Union, to support family life. That remains the objective: your aims are summed up succinctly and clearly on your website:

"The focus of Mothers' Union is on promoting marriage and building stable family life within local communities.

This care is delivered through our three strategic steps as we:

- **Pray** for relationships to be flourishing and loving.
- **Enable** development of all kinds: economic, relational and personal so that family life is strengthened.
- **Campaign** for social justice for those on the margins and for greater recognition of the value of stable family life".

In the first reading we heard that Samuel set up the Ebenezer...and said "thus far has the Lord helped us". If we are to understand what God has done for the Mothers' Union, in what sense today we can after 140 years validly set up an Ebenezer, we must see how far life has come since Mary Sumner started.

It is so important to remember that the golden age mythology of stable Victorian values was just that: mythology. Family life in the Victorian period was under great pressure, especially in the poorest parts of the country. Mary Sumner acted out of concern not only for her own family but for a country in a terrible situation, in which children were not nurtured, women were at risk, households were not stable and the church was not doing very much about it, other than preaching.

You will see the parallels with today. In almost all circumstances of human life the greatest source of hope, and the main location of despair, is found in the family. By family I also mean something close to household, and include where appropriate extended families, because the shape and nature of family life has varied enormously through history and continues to vary in different social contexts today. The structure of families range from the oppressive and abusive to the utterly liberating and healing.

Yet the answer to bad families is not no families but good families. We know the bad statistics. Yet we also know, as Catholic social teaching puts it, that the family is the base community of society, the church in micro form, the training ground for generosity, for courage, for community life, for stability and above all for hope. A happy family life, lived out amidst difficulty and challenge, is amongst the deepest satisfactions existing for human beings, and when it is prevalent in a society lays the foundations for hope and national character in a way that it is impossible to replicate in any other form of human institution. The greatest needs in family life are stability and fidelity, the knowledge that love and community within the family are givens, so that the values lived in the micro, in the family, are practised for the macro, in the world.

The good family is the foundational intermediate group in society. Intermediate groups are those groups that are between the individual and the state – everything from the Mothers' Union, through a family, through companies and all sorts of things – they are what glue us together. And every human being necessarily belongs in one way or another to some intermediate group. Where it is working it addresses issues of care, of isolation, of rootlessness. It is a gift of God in any society, bearing burdens, supporting the vulnerable and stabilising both those who believe themselves autonomous and those who feel themselves to be failures.

I know for myself that there is nowhere that I can take my failures as safely as around the table in the family. And I know having grown up in a different environment, a different sort of household, what a gift of grace that is.

Within the UK and much of Europe, as well as other countries of an Anglo-Saxon tradition and predominant culture at present, the changes in the understanding of the family have been especially rapid since 1945, and even more so since the millennium.

In 1947, for example, there were about 40,000 divorces in the UK, and this was experienced as a near crisis in family life, although it was clear that the war had some very significant impact. In 2013 there were 114,720 divorces for a population of around 65 million as opposed to 50 million in 1947. At the same time the number of people cohabiting (living together as partners but not married or in civil partnerships) had reached, by 2013, 5.9 million, about double the figure in 1996. In 1951 it wasn't a statistic that was collected because it was not significant.

The number of single-parent households has also risen sharply, very often not through anyone's fault. It is a

generalisation, and there are important exceptions, but far more often than not the burden of the care of children in single-parent households still falls on the mother. As generations pass, in many areas this becomes the grandmother, and there are networks of essentially matriarchal groups raising children.

Families are complicated things; I know that personally. They always have been, they always will be – that is the reality. And that is the call and [challenge] of the Mothers' Union.

In addition to the rapid growth of the fluidity of traditional family structures, sometimes with a strong core surrounded by various people who appear and disappear like random comets, there is a radical reimagining of the nature of marriage through the Same Sex Marriage Act of 2014 and similar measures in many other countries.

Here the change has been even faster. In this country, whether we agree or not, it is true that same-sex marriage is now understood to be normal, acceptable and unchallengeable, whereas in the 1990s the very idea would have been heard by the vast majority as incomprehensible, revolutionary and absurd. The speed of change – a change which is not always [welcome] – has led many groups, such as churches and I'm sure the Mothers' Union, to experience themselves living in a culture that they have not even begun to come to terms with, and every Christian denomination and church struggles with the results. It is neither less nor more challenging now to have strong families – strong and fit for the 21st century – than it was when Mary Sumner was a prophetic voice, and the need for reliance on God is the same.

The Israelites were sinful, weak, divided, and fearful. They were rescued by God speaking through Samuel. So it was

for work with families in Victorian times. So it is now. Look not at what remains to be accomplished, but look at what has been done, from whence the Mothers' Union came, and see the hand of God not in great visibility, but through the work of the great army raised up globally by the banners of the Mothers' Union. . .

It is 4 million-strong. Thus far has God helped. It faced the plague of HIV and aids in parts of Africa, and produced grassroots answers. Thus far has God helped. It is a powerful voice in education, both formally and informally, both in scholastic education and in the education of Christian values and family life. Thus far has God helped. It tackles, in isolation, ignorance and underdevelopment. . . It is the world's greatest women's group. It is faithful and a place for fellowship in Jesus Christ. Thus far has God helped.

It is when we see what God has done that we can be gripped by what he will do, that we can place our Ebenezer, claim the ground and say that God has been at work. It is clear that the Israelites struggled, and had to find courage as well as faith, strength as well as spiritual life. So must we today, so must the Mothers' Union.

But we need to come to Jesus's joke, because it is a joke that is full of hope and of command.

He is speaking of prayer, and unusually, we are told the point of this parable, which is to persevere. The Mothers' Union campaigns – excellent; it nurtures – wonderful; but above all, and beneath all, it prays. Thank God. Jesus, in this story, is using a certain amount of irony. Everyone listening would have known both the type of judge – arrogant, corrupt and useless – and the type of widow – tough resourceful and determined. In those times to be a widow and to be anything other was to face death by

neglect. She had neither clout, nor rights, neither money to bribe nor a patronage network to apply pressure, and he was a tough cookie. But she wins.

Imagine the scene: the crowd smiling dryly at the story of the judge, knowingly at the widow, and laughing out loud at the judge's despair. Yet then they see the point. God is just, quite different to the judge. In Samuel he forgives; here he is lavish, generous, just and faithful. But God cannot be manipulated nor purchased. There are no secrets to prayer except perseverance. Yet in one respect he is like the judge: he is able to give effective judgement. So does God for each of us, for you and me, for all of us – for individuals, for Mothers' Union, for church, for nation, for world.

The parable comes as part of a list of comparisons between the apparently powerful and the powerless, showing that God loves the poor and weak.

The Mothers' Union, all 4 million of them around the world, seldom meet in cathedrals, more often in places of poverty, suffering and struggle, like South Sudan or [Burundi]. Their environment is more often that of Samuel than of modern Winchester. . . And for these very reasons – for their weakness, their poverty, their marginalisation, their suffering – the Mothers' Union members are loved by God. They see the light and so often they are the poor.

And because God loves the poor and weak, the closer we are to God the less cause we have to fear, whatever the environment for the family, for all kinds of people. And the more we can expect to see the fruit of our labours, you can expect to see the fruit of yours. Persevering prayer focuses on what is needed, and lays those needs before God, in silence or in words. It is realistic about where we are, and

faithful in looking to God. Above all, it determines to batter God with the issue.

Your long history tells us that circumstances may change, but the needs of human beings in households and families do not. The first reading speaks of a faithful God amidst a weak people, of the need to celebrate the work of God, to identify that work as God, working through human beings and to give God the glory for what has been done. The second reading looks to the future, to a God of love and faithfulness, and says that if the corrupt and arrogant judge can be battered into submission by a weak and obdurate widow, how much more will the God who reaches out to us in Christ, with love and generosity, answer prayer as you seek courageously to set a new pattern for Christian family living in a new world.