

**Mothers Union 140 Years
Winchester Cathedral**

1 Samuel 7: 3-12

Luke 18: 1-8

22nd September 2016

“And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

The story of the widow and the unjust judge comes in a part of the Gospel of St Luke which is full of warnings. He has warned his disciples about what must come for him, the “Son of Man must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation” and goes on to say how uncomfortable it will be when the Son of Man does return; “just as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulphur from heaven and destroyed all of them – it will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed.” That cheerful warning is reinforced when he tells the story of the importunate widow and the unjust judge, and how even a corrupt human being will in the end listen to constant pleading. If that can happen with fallen humanity, how can we think that the God of love will deny justice, how can we imagine that he will “delay long in helping them?” The trouble is we do complain, and so the painful question; “when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth?”

We do need to be aware of the Christian duty to speak of Christ, and need to be aware how much needs to be done to proclaim his name to a society about which we can get very pessimistic. But today we are celebrating a steadfastness that reflects more the people that Jesus celebrates. The importunate widow who persists in her quest for justice is followed by the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, one so sure of his salvation, the other so sure of sin and unworthiness before God. Then he goes on to bless little children, to bless the disregarded whom others would keep from him.

It is a warning that it is the unexpected who will be part of the Kingdom of Heaven, and that the answer to his own question is that faith will be found in unexpected places.

So what about the Mothers Union? Is this an organisation that looks for Christ in unexpected people, unexpected places, and unexpected ways?

That is certainly its founding characteristics. Mary Sumner was ahead of her time it could be said, in that she did not want to vilify women who had been forced by circumstance into prostitution. The tactic was of course to hold out all that could be done to uphold Christian family life. Easy from our perspective to think 140 years on that this was a rather hectoring holier than thou attitude, but as the very good article called “Over a Century of campaigning for social justice” points out, this would be to miss the point. This was a recognition of the terrible exploitation of people, women and children in particular. Mary

Sumner's great supporter and patron Queen Victoria's daughter-in-law Princess Helen was so clear about the need to protect the young. The article has a telling quotation: "There are many women who have no idea of the terrible danger of sending their children unwarned and unprepared into the world where (people) make it their livelihood to exploit the innocent or rather, the ignorant and unwary." The sobering thing about that is you could say the same thing today, as the cynical trafficking of people continues across our globe.

Mary Sumner gathering a group of women from across the social spectrum in the Rectory at Old Arlesford in 1876 began something that looked for Jesus in the unlikely corners of society, and knew that he was there with his redeeming love.

Of course it is difficult to get this right. In the course of trying to strengthen family life it can look as if you are merely condemning those who fail to conform to that standard. There were all those difficulties that you had over the presence of the divorced as members. I remember that as a curate I went to a parish that had no branch of the MU in the main church though one of the daughter churches' did. When I asked why more wasn't being done, the incumbent's wife was very clear that she wasn't going to have anything like that as long as the views on divorcees held. (This was a very long time ago you understand.)

When I left the parish after the usual three years, I went to Papua New Guinea as a parish priest. We went with two small boys under three, and had one of those dreadful plane journeys where typhoons in Hong Kong put everything out of sync, and it took us nearly four days to get to PNG. When we eventually got to our destination the port city of Lae on the NE Coast of PNG, who picked up the pieces of a young family, jet lagged and exhausted and disorientated? – well no need to guess – the wonderful members of the Mothers Union. Not only was the great gift of pastoral care and hospitality their keynote, like so many clergy who serve in the Communion I found an organization that had a significant presence in a country where the voice of women was all too easily marginalised, and where domestic abuse in urban areas was endemic.

Those were wonderful years for me, and the Mothers Union produced some very fine leaders. The only scary aspect for a young member of the clergy was the enrolling of new members within a Eucharist. The signs of membership were very important to them, not because of vanity or status, but so that they could visibly show the values they wanted to live. So things like the badge, and printed T Shirts and LapLaps (or sarongs) were important to them. That was fine by me until I was asked to pin the badges on, and I then realised that for this occasion some of the new members had come in their traditional dress of beaten tapa cloth, cowrie shell necklaces and beads and leaf decorations. It

looked splendid, but it also meant they were uncovered on their top half - where to pin the badge? I just handed it to them!

One of our splendid presidents of MU in PNG went to a conference in the UK and she came back saying how important was the link with worldwide members, and how encouraging it was to have such links. She was particularly encouraged by one of the Diocesan Presidents who knew me she said, and produced a photo of them together. The more I looked at the photo the more it was clear that I was looking at the wife of my first incumbent who had been so against the MU! Partly policy had changed, but more to the point the penny had dropped with her about the extraordinary difference the MU was making worldwide.

All that was a long time ago, but only last Saturday I was clearly shown the continuing gifts that the organisation brings. For the last seven years I have chaired the Melanesian Mission UK which is the support base in this country for the Anglican Church of Melanesia which includes the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Last Saturday I handed over the chair to the Bishop of Shrewsbury at our annual festival and one of the presentations during the day was about the work of the Mothers Union.

This is just one Mothers Union in a small country which is remote, poor and facing all the pressures of western materialism battering the doors of their culture.

So the MU runs a Positive Parenting Programme. Not the language of Mary Sumner but very much in line with her thinking. But the hard fact underneath this is that two thirds of the women in Melanesia suffer domestic abuse. This programme educates men more than women. Then there are literacy clubs for people in a country where universal education finishes at primary school. There are savings clubs to give women some economic control, a small clothing business that helps them earn money, and they hold dear the offering of hospitality, which is not just making the tea, but offering Christian care and sustenance.

That is the sort of work being replicated in thousands of places around the world and many of you will recognise the sort of thing.

That work is so vital, and affects whole nations.

The work remains. I know that in our own culture you continue to be concerned for the nurturing of Christian family life, in justice for the least well off – for a constant desire to let Christ be seen in and brought to, the unexpected people and places.

God has blessed in extraordinary ways what you have done over 140 years, and your persistence and courage in that has let the Good News be known. No doubt there are often discouragements, as there are for the Church. No doubt you will have to stop and think again about how you are heard, but these are things confronting the whole church. Even a corrupt judge did the right thing in

the end. God who is the source of all love and of all creation will hear your faithful prayers. Persist still – because our Church, our Communion, our world needs you.

“When the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth?” The question stays hanging, but if the MU stays true to its longing to listen to God, and to look for his love in the unexpected places, the Son of Man will find faith on earth.