

MOTHERS UNION 150TH ANNIVERSARY

Bishop Tricia's sermon

150 years ago Mary Sumner's eldest daughter gave birth. This significant arrival reminded Mary how demanding bringing up her own children had been.

Mary was the wife of a local vicar and what she did next was remarkable and unexpected in its day. She sent out an invitation to mothers in the parish to come together to offer one another mutual support.

This was a quite radical action at the time, for she brought together women of all backgrounds and classes in support of one another and of others.

What began in a family, grew to encompass a village, spread into their Diocese and then on to other Dioceses; Winchester, Ely, Exeter, Hereford and more.

It didn't even stop there: today the Mother's Union is a global force composed of over 4 million members in over 80 countries.

Now we come together to celebrate the amazing work of God through these past 150 years.

Anniversaries such as this one are curious things. They invite us to look back with gratitude, whilst also inviting us to ask what exactly is it that we are celebrating?

One answer, of course, would be longevity. One hundred and fifty years is no small achievement. Generations have sustained the life of the Mothers' Union through wars, economic hardship, profound social change and, not least, dramatic changes in family life itself.

But even this remarkable longevity is not the main reason we celebrate today.

St Paul writing to the Christians at Ephesus so many centuries ago suggests an even deeper reason to celebrate.

We read that Paul does not pray that the Church will become larger, more influential or more secure. Instead, he prays that it may be "rooted and grounded in love"; that Christ may dwell among his people; and that together the people who follow Jesus might begin to comprehend "the breadth and length and height and depth" of the love of Christ—a love that ultimately exceeds comprehension.

It is one of the most audacious and glorious prayers ever prayed.

Paul is praying that a group of people should become so deeply shaped by Christ's love that they acquire a particular character, a way of inhabiting the world that makes the gospel visible.

That provides, I think, the proper lens through which to celebrate the Mothers' Union.

Not first as an organisation, no matter how long-lived.

But an expression of what a community rooted in Christ's love looks like.

Jesus, gives us another important image for such a community, which we heard in our reading from Matthew's gospel.

"You are the salt of the earth."

"You are the light of the world."

Both metaphors are striking because neither calls attention to itself.

Salt does not exist to be admired. It disappears into the life of whatever it seasons. Light does not illuminate itself; it enables others to see.

Neither is spectacular. Both are indispensable.

The Church is rarely at its best when it is trying to be impressive, but rather when, almost unnoticed, it makes human life more truthful, more hope-filled because Christ is present within it.

Much of the ministry of the Mothers' Union for over 150 years and still today, has possessed precisely that quality. Globally the Mother's Union, composed of women (and some men) from a host of different backgrounds across the world, work together towards the ending of injustice which that holds people, especially women and girls, from their fullest potential. The Mother's Union works towards ending poverty. The Mother's Union works towards ending violence, again especially that directed towards women and girls.

This has often begun with careful attention: noticing where dignity is threatened, where loneliness is growing, where families need encouragement, where practical support might speak more eloquently than many words.

Think for a moment about what happens on Tynwald Day, at the Southern Show or this weekend at the Royal Manx Show. Hundreds, thousands of people celebrating the life and culture of our island. Nestled among the marquees is a

space where an anxious carer can feed a baby in peace, where a nappy can be changed with dignity, where someone exhausted finds welcome rather than embarrassment. Practical care offered by Mother's Union members

Or think of the work undertaken in our Islands prison to support families, especially the children within families, affected by one member being within the criminal justice system. Loving, non-judgemental care offered by Mother's Union members.

This approach expresses a theological conviction: that every human life is to be received and welcomed for this is how God reaches towards and receives each one of us.

This is our calling; what Jesus means by salt and light.

A quality of life that quietly changes the moral atmosphere around it.

This means that an anniversary such as this is an opportunity to give thanks for all that has been, including past members and leaders who have brought us to this point.

An anniversary is also an opportunity to celebrate all that is underway now and to look forward to all that is yet to come.

For Paul's prayer is always unfinished: the immeasurable love of Christ is never exhausted.

And Jesus' words are in the present tense.

"You are the salt."

"You are the light."

Not "you once were."

150 years have passed since Mary Sumner founded the Mother's Union. Much has changed in the world over that time

Families are more diverse and the demands and challenges have shifted: today, for example, many experience profound isolation despite unprecedented connectivity.

Our society is more secular, but no less hungry for meaning, belonging and hope.

So, the vocation of the Church and the Mother's Union remains:

To be rooted in Christ's love.

To be communities where human dignity is honoured.

To practise hospitality that expects nothing in return.

To make visible, in countless ordinary acts, the extraordinary generosity of God.

Thankfully we do not do this along, nor in our own strength.

If Paul is right, and if Christ truly dwells among his people, then there remains more love to discover, more compassion to offer, more neighbours to welcome and more light yet to shine.

Which brings us to the remarkable confidence with which Paul ends his prayer. This is God's work in which we are privileged to join, not our work alone.

"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine..." writes Paul.

It all rests in the God whose purposes always exceed our imagination.

To him, therefore be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Bishop Tricia's sermon in the Cathedral Church of St German, Peel, on 9th August 2026