

A sculpture by the artist Jill Sim, *Madonna and Child . . . Flight*, shows a young woman running at full pelt with a child in her arms. Her headscarf and full-skirted dress evoke media images of mothers and children fleeing from the embattled cities of Syria and Yemen.

Her trainers could identify her with almost anyone. Her body is tilted forward for speed, and the infant is almost sliding out of her grasp. It is a reminder of the suffering and desperation of all refugees.

With this powerful icon of parental determination to protect their children in mind, it is startling — even shocking — to read the final line of the episode from the story of Samuel's birth and infancy which provides one of Mothering Sunday's Old Testament readings. Hannah, who has been given the son that she longed for after praying in the temple at Shiloh, takes him back as a toddler to present him to Eli, the high priest.

"She left him there for the Lord" (1 Samuel 1.28). That matter-of-fact announcement confronts our modern understanding of motherhood, attuned to agonising narratives of what it means to give up a child, and continually presented with evidence of the failure of institutions to care for the children entrusted to them.

The story of Hannah and Samuel would later influence the apocryphal Gospel of James (second century) and its account of the infancy and childhood of Mary. It describes how Mary's parents handed over their three-year-old daughter to be brought up in the Temple. The subject is a popular one in art, and Titian's depiction of the tiny girl ascending a steep flight of steps, at the top of which stands a bearded figure in high-priestly robes, eloquently evokes the solitariness of the child.

It hangs in Venice, and perhaps it served to console the parents who gave their daughters to convents because dowries could not be found for them. The promise of a holy destiny might have gone some way to reconciling mothers and fathers who did not find separation easy just because it was practical.

In our gospel, Luke records the visit of the adult Mary and Joseph, with the infant Jesus, to the Temple in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph will not leave their child, but the prophecy that they hear from Simeon places the rest of their life as a family under the shadow of loss (Luke 2.34-35). And yet that is not the end of the story, and the Gospel-writer insists that the more sombre note introduced by Simeon's words should be readjusted to joy. This is Anna's cue.

She sees straight to the “redemption of Jerusalem”, and begins to proclaim to all who share that hope that its fulfilment is imminent (Luke 2.38).

The carefully controlled oscillation between suspense and relaxation, darkness and light, and sorrow and joy is the mark of a skilled narrator. And in its ambiguity it is also true to Mothering Sunday’s complexity as both day of refreshment and joy, and the point at which Lent moves closer to the Passion. It is true also to the complexity of the human families, in their many configurations, that God in Christ draws close to himself on the cross.



*Madonna and Child . . . Flight*

a sculpture by Jill Sim

The presentation of Mary, by Titian

