

Mothers Day

Mothers Day began with a simple domestic gesture that caught on. People were encouraged to give a present to their mothers to acknowledge their love and their service to their family. As is the case with similar celebrations it could easily be corrupted by commercial interests that focused on selling gifts and often offered a saccharine view of motherhood. It was a day when people could feel sentimental about their mothers without asking themselves whether what they expected of them was reasonable and how they themselves might share some of their mother's burdens. The Mother's Day present could become a cheap discharge of a heavy debt.

The last years of Covid pushes us to think more seriously about our relationships, including the part of mothers in families. The media have been full of images of mothers left to cope with difficult situations both for themselves and for their families. We have seen the long lines of women and children seeking safety outside of Ukraine. These mothers must feed and raise their children while dealing with their own anxieties and grief for their land, for the men whom they have left behind and for their future. We have also seen the images of mothers surveying their flooded homes in Queensland and New South Wales, facing the task of again making a home for their family. During the time of coronavirus, too, many of the health workers were mothers who had to cope with the loss of paid work and the threat of homelessness in addition to the other trials in an already precarious life.

In all these situations, however, the dominant images have not been of hopelessness but of great resilience, of people finding the necessary inner resources in times of anxiety and threat. They look to the future and not to the past.

The images of heroic mothers, like the images of women in responsible positions in employment and in public life, are a gift to our society. For those of us who are not mothers, however, they can prove sentimental and self-serving. They can distract us from the unacceptability of the burden we ask mothers to carry and offer us an excuse us or not asking what kind of society we want to build and what sacrifices that will ask of us.

Mothers Day reminds us of the importance for any society of mothering – of giving priority and time to raising children and making a home in which all are valued and all are listened to compassionately. In modern societies in which mothers are also engaged in demanding work the gifts and the time involved in these forms of nurturing cannot be left to women who have borne children but must be encouraged and developed in men, women and children.

Mothering also crosses generations. Grandmothers are an integral part of the life of most families. They are honoured not simply because of their past role as mothers but for the way in which they continue to nurture people in the present.

If mothering is necessary in society, too, we must look at how we support mothers. Many women in the most important work for society such as working in nursing homes are kept in precarious and poorly remunerated work. Our society can be better than that in its treatment of all women including mothers.