

## *Mothering Sunday*

We keep Mothering Sunday on the Fourth Sunday of Lent (sometimes called Laetare or Refreshment Sunday). The origins of Mothering Sunday were almost certainly pre-Christian. Both the Ancient Greeks and the Romans had a spring festival to celebrate motherhood: When Christianity was established in Britain, the focus became a celebration of the Mother Church.

Sometime after the Norman Conquest, there grew up a practice of daughter churches visiting the Mother Church of the Diocese (Cathedral) on a particular Sunday in Lent, probably for the purpose of presenting an offering.

In the seventeenth century, there arose the custom of giving young people in domestic service a holiday on Mid-Lent Sunday, to enable them to visit their parents and the family home, was then well-nigh universal. Bishop Wheatley in a commentary on the Book of Common Prayer, published in 1720, tells us that the custom which he calls "Midlenting" or "Mothering" was even then a very ancient one.

This annual return visit, marked by gifts on both sides, must have acted as a powerful influence to strengthen and renew the bonds of family love. The young folk took as a present for their parents a small cake known as a Simnel. (The word Simnel, is derived from the Latin *Similia*, meaning wheat-flour.) The parents provided "furmity" or "frumenty," a dish of hulled wheat boiled in milk, and seasoned with cinnamon and sugar. In the North of England and in Scotland, however, the meal was steeped pease, fried in butter, with pepper and salt. These pancakes were called Carlings, and Carling Sunday became the local name for the day.

In shape the Simnel cake resembled a pork pie, but in materials it was a rich plum pudding inside a stiff and hard pastry crust. Simnels were made up very stiff, tied up in a cloth and boiled for several hours, after which they were brushed over with egg and then baked. When ready for the table, the crust was as hard as if made of wood.

The gathering of families on Mothering Sunday was probably due to the older custom of going together to the Mother Church. Today Mothering Sunday is a special service when children and families are invited to church to bless gifts and give thanks for and to those who care for us and the Mother Church.

Of course, the original and non-biblical Mothering Sunday theme of "Mother Church" – has little meaning nowadays I fear, unless we reflect on our churches as bodies of people, all of whom together care for us, teach us, feed us, discipline us and protect us as a good mother should do.

That is where a 'Clypping' can be a profound experience. 'Clypping' comes from the Saxon word 'ycleping' meaning 'embracing' and the ceremony involves the church family joining hands around the church to form an unbroken chain, and giving thanks to God.