

INTRO

Today is Mothering Sunday. Some of you tell me every year that you want a simple, happy, all age service to celebrate the family bond between mothers and children, but I also know that others find Mothering Sunday painful, for a variety of reasons - where the relationship between parents and children is strained or has broken down, and celebrating the gift of children can be difficult for those who have suffered miscarriage, still birth or lost a child, who were never able to marry or to have children of their own. So most vicars I know are deeply anxious about Mothering Sunday. It feels like being the character in an action movie who has to defuse a ticking time bomb: Should he cut the brown wire, or the green wire, or try to throw the bomb off the crowded train or plane?

Now it is right and proper that we should honour our parents, mothers, fathers and step-parents, in accordance with the Fifth Commandment, that each generation should thank its predecessor. (Unlike Raphael Samuel, the Indian business man who sued his parents in 2019 for bringing him into the world without his permission). The Old Testament begins with a command to be fruitful and multiply, God promises Abraham that his descendants will be as numberless as the stars, and the Old Testament regards being childless as a great misfortune. The New Testament begins with the genealogy and the birth of Jesus: as we heard in the *Magnificat* Mary rejoices that 'all generations will call me blessed, and that God's "mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation." But both Jesus and Paul also clearly teach us to give high honour to those who have chosen to remain single and celibate: as St Paul said: (1 Cor 7.8) "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am."

Where does that leave Mothering Sunday? We should honour our parents, so if as a church we observe Mothering Sunday, ought we not also to mark Fathering Sunday?

Families are free to celebrate Mothers Day with gifts, flowers, meals or cards, or ignore it, but what do we hope to achieve as a church?

Mothering Sunday seems to have begun in England in the 16th Century, because one of the readings for the Fourth Sunday of Lent in the Book of Common Prayer is Galatians 4, which says "Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all" (Gal 4.26) The original focus seems to have been on encouraging people to visit their home or 'mother' church for a service and family gathering, but popular culture has focussed on thanking our mothers and the church element has been almost forgotten.

But this morning I want to address an issue, which is much more serious and sensitive, and of which many are simply unaware. It is political (but not party-political) and could feel deeply personal, though I want to emphasise that I am not trying to criticise or blame any one personally.

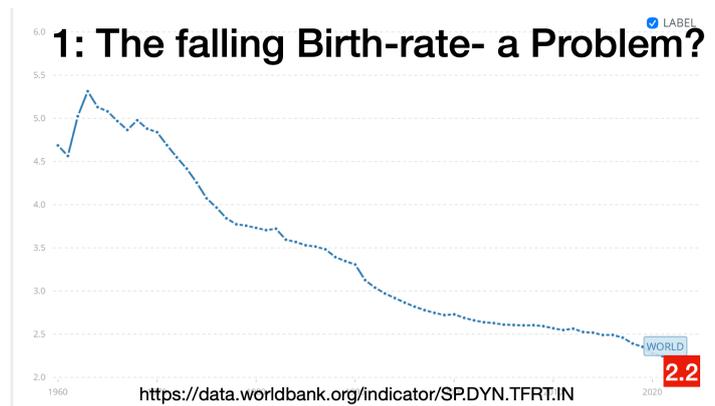
The issue is the falling birth rate, not just in England, but around the globe. I have been reading and thinking about this issue for some years, and I believe that we need to recognise this is a serious problem, begin to explore the causes and consider how we might respond as a church, because I believe that as a church we can be part of the solution.

I repeat that I am not trying to criticise any of you- I cannot begin to know all the different factors that led some of you to remain single, others to marry, to have children or not.

As a church, we have a duty to honour parents, to honour the single, and show sensitivity and compassion to all those who longed for children and were not able, but I think that as a church we need to face a global problem, that is already becoming acute in some parts of Devon, and suggest ways that as a congregation and community we can work together to be part of the solution.

POINT ONE: The Problem

It is a simple fact that our birth rate has been falling since the 1960s, has been below replacement level since the 1970s, and is falling more rapidly since 2010. The birth rate ('Total Fertility Rate' TFR is usually expressed as the average number of children per woman, (though men are obviously involved) and the replacement level for a sustainable population is estimated at about 2.2, but the rate now stands at 1.4 in England.



But you will also be aware that the population of England is rising- there are new housing developments everywhere. Surely over-population is the immediate problem - too many people, too few resources, both in England and in the world whose population is still rising. The UK Population is forecast to continue rising until 2047.

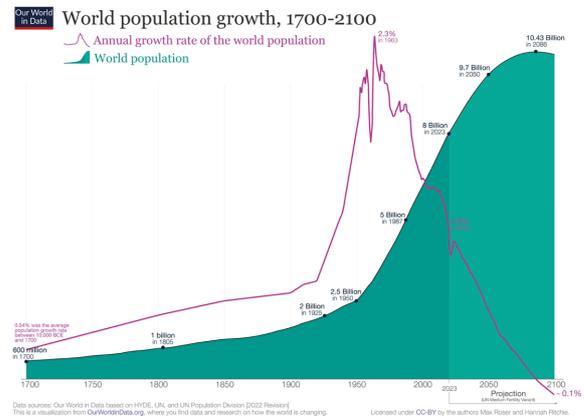
The fear of being overwhelmed by growing populations, especially of foreigners, is as old as history. It drove the unnamed Pharaoh of Exodus to order the genocidal policy of throwing newborn Hebrew boys into the Nile, and many nations have often looked anxiously at their fertile neighbours - 19th France at Germany, 20th Germany at the Slavs, and the Slavs at China. Fertile nations also worry about their ability to feed themselves.

In 1798 Rev Thomas Malthus, vicar of Wotton in Surrey, wrote a controversial essay, An Essay on the Principle of Population, noting that improved food production temporarily eased food shortages and poverty but led to an inevitable population increase, until poverty returned, leading to war, poverty, famine and disease - the 'Malthusian Catastrophe'. "The power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man."



We may look at a graph of the exponential growth of the world population and share the fear of Rev Malthus - from 1 billion in his day, 2 billion in 1925, to 8 billion today and a forecast peak of 10.4 billion in 2086. But Thomas's fears have proved unfounded. The Green (Agricultural) Revolution has avoided the mass starvation he predicted, and the global birth rate (marked in red on the graph) - the key factor in the growth of population- has been falling steeply since the 1960s, so that it now stands at 2.2 - replacement rate. It is likely to reduce further, and lead to a gentle reduction in world population, which could be a good thing.

World Population Growth



But that global average disguises wide national variations. There are some central African countries- Congo, Niger- where the birth rate is 6.1, but many other countries where it is far below replacement - Italy, Russia, Japan and South Korea at 0.7. The UK rate now stands at 1.4 per woman.

What does a falling birth rate do to a country, a town or city? If you think of the population as effectively three generations - the new generation of children, the generation of their parents and the generation of their grandparents- with a stable population, each new generation should be about the same as the one before, but with a birth rate below replacement levels, each new generation will be smaller than the last.

The population of Bovey by....

If Fertility rate is	2.2 (replacement)	1.4 (England)- 64%	0.6 (South Korea)-32%
Now (2024)	8204	8204	8204
next generation (2054)	8204	6081	4267
in two generations (2084)	8204	3831	1365
three generations (2104)	8204	2414	436
four generations (2134)	8204	1521	139

A fertility rate of 1.4 means that each new generation is only 63% of its parents's generation, and a rate of 0.7 means 32%. So in 110 years (four generations) a town of 8000 like Bovey will have shrunk to a village of 1500 in England, and a hamlet of 140 in Japan. What are the implications of that? We won't need all those new houses, so property prices will fall, but more seriously, there won't be enough workers to care for the increasing proportion of elderly, or pay taxes for the NHS, Social Care and pensions. The Triple Lock is doomed. Schools will close, settlements be abandoned, fields lie uncultivated, as is already happening in Japan. Over 1400 elderly Japanese people a week die at home alone and unnoticed (kodokushi).

A recent article in the Telegraph (28 Feb 2026) highlighted East Devon as the Old Age Capital of Britain, with West Devon in third place.

The director of the Centre for Population Change at the University of Southampton, Prof Jane Falkingham, told the Guardian in September 2025: "We happen to be alive at this really transitional moment. We're moving from a world with high fertility and high mortality to a world of low mortality and low fertility. We have to get our heads around how we're going to make that transition from the old world to the new world."

This process of depopulation will probably come in three stages.

In stage one demographic momentum - the longevity of previous generations, and mass immigration, keeps the population rising despite a below replacement birth rate - the UK is at that stage now.

At Stage Two natural decline becomes apparent as deaths exceed births, even if mass immigration obscures this, as in Germany, and UK from mid 2030s

At Stage Three Absolute Decline becomes obvious, as is already the case in Russia, China and Japan, and countries without mass immigration.

POINT TWO: The Causes - who or what is to blame?

In the Exodus story Pharaoh wickedly ordered the infanticide because he and Egyptians were in dread of their Israelite slaves.

Why has the global birth rate been falling since 1963? Which Pharaoh ordered this? Many governments have encouraged family planning campaigns to prevent being overwhelmed by population increase; the Chinese Communist party enforced its 'one child only policy' from 1979 until 2015. There has been no mysterious loss of human fertility, though fiction writers help us to imagine that terrifying scenario. In 1996 Margaret Atwood published her dystopian novel "The Handmaid's Tale" about a future where fertility is diminished, and the US Republic of Gilead responds by making some women into 'handmaids' - sex slaves - for breeding. In 2008 PD James wrote her novel, "The Children of Men", describing a world where no children were born after 1995, and people have to come to terms with the end of human civilisation. In 2023 the Economist highlighted an advert made by Plasmon baby food called "2050-the last baby in Italy" showing the consequences of demographic decline in Italy.

The obvious causes are much more benign.

The Scientific and Industrial Revolution enabled allowed the population to grow as Rev Malthus noticed, and the Green agricultural revolution has avoided the famine that Malthus predicted. Improved health and hygiene have reduced infant mortality rates and allowed people to live longer, and since the 1960s improved education and literacy, family planning and birth-control have allowed women to choose their own fertility rate. Women in every developing nation have responded to these new circumstances, the birth rate has reduced, and this is to be welcomed.

But that success has created this new problem, and the developments which enabled us to limit unsustainable population growth are now leading us below the sustainable replacement level, particularly in developed economies.

Surveys have been done asking young women how many children they would like to have, and the answers are still ‘well above replacement level’.

So what is hindering them? And you will have lots of ideas from your own family experience- the sheer cost of raising a family, the cost of renting or buying a home big enough for two or three children, or a car big enough for the car seats, the cost of childcare if the mother needs or wants to go back to paid work to pay the mortgage. There are serious financial disincentives to raising a family, and I think this should be a much bigger political issue. In recent weeks both Bridget Philippon (Labour health Secretary) and Danny Kruger of Reform have made public statements about the need for government policies to allow people to have larger families.

But there are also social and cultural factors. The most stable foundation for raising children is Marriage, for parenthood is a demanding role and children need mothers and fathers, but marriage rates are falling, and too many marriages struggling or ending. Today’s Sunday Times announced a new Report (Baby Bust- Centre for Social Justice) that blames the shortage of mothers on immature men

There is also an ideology called ‘anti-natalism’ that regards having children as unethical on an over-crowded and ecologically doomed planet. #Childfreemillennial is a group of online influencers urging young women not to have children. The Birthstrike movement wants to spare your potential child from dystopia, help to reverse climate change, pressure governments to prioritise children and family over profits, and give you freedom to pursue your passions.

There have even been Christian anti-natalists, as described by St Augustine:

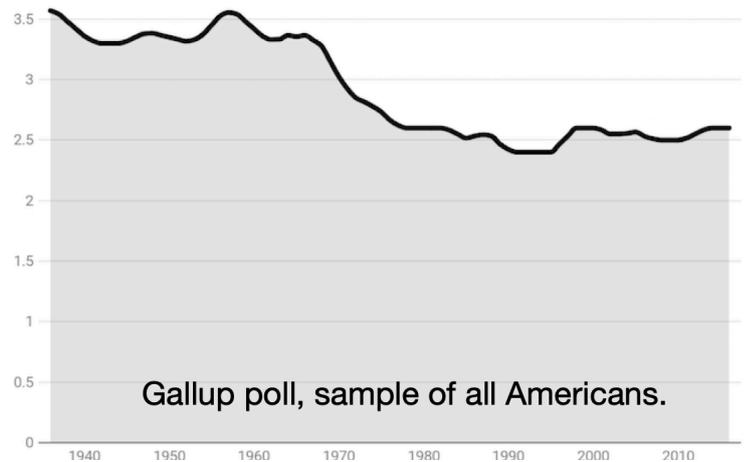
But I am aware of some that murmur: What, say they, if all men should abstain from all sexual intercourse, whence will the human race exist? Would that all would this, only in "charity out of a pure heart, and good conscience, and faith unfeigned;" much more speedily would the City of God be filled, and the end of the world hastened.”¹

Our culture stresses freedom and fulfilment for the individual, at the cost of duty to others: “You do you”- “be true to yourself”, and sadly our culture does not respect those women who choose to raise families in the home. According to the Christian Institute a third of women would rather raise their children at home than send them out to childcare.

And I need to mention the increased rate of abortion: in China for every 10 million births there are 9 million abortions. In the UK 1 pregnancy in 3 is ended by abortion. Ann Furedi, a passionate supporter of women’s right to choose, wrote in February this year:

Ideal Number of Kids for a Family

Gallup poll, sample of all Americans. Linear interpolations for missing years, smoothing=3.



Gallup poll, sample of all Americans.

¹ P. Schaff (ed.), Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series, Volume III St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises, New York: Cosimo, 2007, p. 404.

“I may not agree with her views on abortion, but conservative, pro-life commentator and former MP Miriam Cates is surely right to point out that when one in three pregnancies ends in termination, there is something significant going on. Why are a third of all women who receive a positive pregnancy test responding not with joy but with despair? Why are so many greeting the prospect of motherhood not with excitement, but with fear and despondency?

There are clearly socio-cultural forces at work here. For a start, taking the leap to embrace an unplanned pregnancy flies in the face of our risk-averse, hyper-planned, all-about-me modern culture. And the demands of child-raising seem daunting when we no longer know our neighbours, when we live far from our families, when relationships are transient and temporary.

Given the social and cultural environment in which we now live, perhaps we shouldn't be shocked that a third of women say 'no' to an unplanned pregnancy. Maybe it's more surprising that two out of three women still do make **the leap of faith** and commit to raising a child.” Ann Furedi (<https://www.spiked-online.com/2026/02/02/whats-driving-the-huge-rise-in-abortions/>)

Notice those words “Leap of Faith”. When I was researching this talk I found alongside a chart of population statistics some online comments: Kimberly “This is why I chose not to add to the population - and I'm glad I made that decision”.

The Pharaoh in our times is not our government, but our own culture, our way of thinking.

POINT 3: RESPONSES: What can anyone do?

The Exodus story highlights some heroines resisting the orders of Pharaoh. There are the courageous Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who disobey and deceive Pharaoh, and the noble daughter of Pharaoh, who rescues the infant Moses from the Nile and raises him in safety, and there are the ordinary people of Israel, men and women of faith and hope, who do not give up on raising families, despite the risk, but cry out to the Lord for rescue. I am glad to see political recognition of the problem on the left and the right. Dr Paul Moreland is probably our leading demographer, and has surveyed the problem, the causes and the usually ineffective solutions in his book “No one Left” (Forum 2024) . It is clear that government policies (tax breaks, paternity leave, childcare) alone are not enough. China is now taxing condoms to try and raise the birth rate.

Government Policies usually do not last long enough to change the course of a culture, but there are developing or developed societies where the birth rate is at or above replacement rate, such as Indonesia and Israel. Dr Morland shows that one of the Abrahamic faiths is usually a major factor in those lands. Perhaps the most successful policy is in the former Soviet republic of Georgia. The population is overwhelmingly Orthodox, despite 70 years of Communist persecution, and the Patriarch Ilia II is held in high regard. Since 2007 he has personally offered to baptise and be the godparent of every third child born to a family, and has 50,000 godchildren. (he holds four mass baptisms at the Cathedral every year). He seems to have inspired the nation, because the birth rate has risen from 1.5 to 2.2. I am not sure that the Pope or the Archbishops of the Church of England would inspire the same result. But his example is an encouragement.

We can resist the prophets of climate catastrophe, the misinformation about Malthusian over-population growth, and I believe that as a church we are called to be people of faith and hope because we know that we are called by the God ‘who shows love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments’ (Ex 20.6). As Mary sang in the Magnificat (Lk 1.46-55)

“From now on all generations will call me blessed,

His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”

In a culture without hope or trust in God, the future is fearful - war, climate disaster- and raising a new generation seems reckless, but if we know who holds the future, we can trust him for the future of our children and children’s children.

Raising children is increasingly hard work, when families are widely scattered and marriage declining , but we as a church can work to encourage and support marriage, and we have in the church community a unique resource - which is the envy of many - a local community of friends and neighbours, surrogate grandparents, which meets on Sundays and weekdays, supported by a family worker, hopefully a youth worker and teams of dedicated volunteers, and which also cares for the elderly and lonely.

CONCLUSION

I do hope you have not misheard me. I am NOT calling for a patriarchal republic of Gilead - birth rate targets, or suffocating social pressure to conform., but I believe we can resist a dangerous trend. We must remember that the church is a community of forgiven sinners: we all fall short of the glory of God, and we are all freely justified by God’s grace shown to us in Jesus. It is a difficult balancing act, but I believe that it is possible for the church to honour those who are single and celibate, **and** to celebrate marriage. We are called to uphold the family, to be actively pro-life, but also to be a place of welcome and healing for those who have made bad choices, who are struggling in their marriages, or as single parents. So on this Mothering Sunday I invite you to join the Resistance to our fearful, self-centred and anti-natalist culture, be a Shiprah, Puah or Pharoah’s daughter and have faith and hope in the God who will keep his promises and sustain his people for a thousand generations, until Jesus returns.

Let us celebrate Mothering Sunday, not just with a card and flowers for mum, but renewed trust in God’s purpose for his church, a nurturing community and mother to all generations.

His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.

Bibliography:

Dr Paul Morland: “No-one left- why the world needs more children” (Forum 2024)

Baby Bust (Centre for Social Justice, March 2026)

word count: 3327

Icebreaker: What is Mothering Sunday about, and how should we celebrate it?
Who might find Mothering Sunday difficult or painful?

Read Exodus 20.12

What is the promised blessing that comes with the Fifth Commandment?

Read Exodus 1.15-2.10 Why does Pharaoh order the massacre of Hebrew boys?
Who disobeys his order, and why? (vv 1.17, 2.1, 2.6)

The Old Testament generally regards fertility and fruitfulness as a great blessing, and a fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham (Gen 12.2-3). It therefore regards childlessness as a tragedy (see Ps 127, 1 Sam 1-2), but the New Testament also honours those who remain single and celibate (Matthew 19.11-12, 1 Cor 7.7-8)

Read Luke 1.46-55 How does Mary's perspective on generations shape our understanding of raising the next generation of children as an act of faith and hope?

In Graham's sermon , he considers the implications of the falling birth rate.
Why do you think that the birth rate has fallen? Is this a problem?

Some governments have tried to raise the birth rate by their policies. What practical steps might help in the UK?

How might we as a church encourage and support families to raise children, while honouring and supporting those who remain single or childless?

Pray for all to find a welcome in our church, and none to feel excluded or rejected.

A fuller, text version of Graham's sermon can be found at:-
<https://pptbovey.church/sermons/>