

The Fatherhood of God – Trinity 2 (Fathers' Day) 2009

Psalm 107, Job 38 vv 1-11 p538, II Corinthians 6 vv 1-13 p1161, Mark 4 vv 35—43 p1008

Today is Fathers' Day – not in itself a festival of the Church, but still worth celebrating. St Paul reminds us that *Honour thy father and mother is the first commandment with a promise*. The Bible and the teaching of the Church are clear that family life is a key element of God's design for the human race. I think most people would accept that, whatever their religion – although we in C21 Britain have become extremely vague about what we mean by a family: whether couples need to marry, whether couples need to be of different sexes, whether communes might not be as good as couples, whether marriages need to be lifelong and who counts as family in a bewildering network of step relationships. Let me make it clear that the Christian understanding of family is based on a man and a woman each leaving their own parents to cleave to one another in a lifelong marriage of unconditional love in which children may be procreated and *brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord*. There are obligations between family members to care for one another no matter what. Anything less is a falling short of the ideal and to fall short is to sin. As it happens, of course, the Church is made up entirely of sinners – redeemed sinners – and our mission is not only to stand up for what is right but also to include within our fellowship those who have gone wrong and those for whom the world has gone wrong.

What I want to concentrate on today, however, is the fact that Jesus taught us to call God *Father*. Many religions would find that hard to do. Our Job reading reminded us that God is infinitely greater than we are and so He is. It is astonishing that we might presume to address Him familiarly as *Father*. Yet that is precisely what Jesus teaches us to do. *After this manner pray ye*, he said, *Our Father which art in heaven*. The Greek writers of the New Testament preserved the actual Aramaic word Jesus used, *Abba*. It is the ordinary word an ordinary human child would use to address his ordinary human father. *Abba* is a family word and so precious to the early Church that even people who normally spoke Greek preserved that Aramaic word as the name Jesus taught them to call God. It is astonishing that we may call God *Father*, but it is what Jesus taught us to do.

It has been pointed out, however, that the Fatherhood of God might not be a terribly helpful concept if you have been the victim of a bad father yourself. Some men just walk away from women they have impregnated and take no further interest. Some people do not even know who their fathers are. Some children are born as the result of rape. Even when fathers are around, they may be inadequate, neglectful, cruel or abusive. Mothers are not universally perfect, but they do seem less likely to abandon or abuse their children than fathers. Nevertheless I am convinced that children have the best chance in life if they have two loving parents who are married to each other – although of course many single parents and step parents make an excellent job of things and there are plenty of good, responsible adults around who grew up in tough circumstances.

There might also be a difficulty in that society's understanding of the respective rôles of the two sexes seems to be changing rapidly. In theory, society no longer believes that men and women are essentially different with different parts to play in the domestic and national economy. The idea that the man is the head of the household with responsibility for

defending his family and providing for them, while women and children are somehow subservient, and the wife's main responsibility is to keep house and look after the children sounds old fashioned. It is, however, pretty much the model the Bible works with and pretty much the model adopted by Christian cultures until quite recently. Whether we need to question the assumptions of feminism and contemporary ideas about the family or whether we need to re-examine our ideas about the fatherhood of God in the light of them, I will leave you to decide. For now, a sermon on the Fatherhood of God, based on the biblical and traditional teaching about God and family life.

I mentioned those fathers who abandon their families. Well God is not like that. One thing you can be sure of about God is that He is faithful. St Paul says, *God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.* Some fathers are cruel to their children, punishing them inconsistently or without reason. God is not like that. He does chasten us, but He is just and chastens us for our own good. The Epistle to the Hebrews says of our earthly fathers, *For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he (God) for our profit that we might be partakers of his holiness.*

Traditionally, it has been the rôle of fathers to provide for their families and defend them. We know that everything we have comes from God. He provides for all our needs. Jesus says, *Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things.* He provides generally, in that the Universe is a self sustaining system for all the aeons that may be left to it, and He cares for us individually. We can and must take all our needs, hopes and anxieties to Him in prayer. Jesus goes on, *But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto.*

A good father not only provides for His children; He also brings them up. He teaches them how to live. As the bishop reminded us last Sunday, God brings order out of chaos. The Universe, God's creation, operates in an orderly fashion, in accordance with the laws of Science. In the same way, God brings order to our lives. There is the moral law, the law of love. If we live in accordance with the law of universal love, we live for ever in harmony with nature, humanity and God. God teaches us His law of love in the pages of the Bible, in the divine gift of conscience, through the Holy Spirit and by the life, death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ.

When I was a child, the big present everyone wanted was a bike. If you were lucky and your parents were able to buy you a bike, the next thing was to learn to ride it. Dad took you out and showed you, but he also held you and kept his hand on you till you could do it yourself. Again, as the bishop reminded us last week, none of us kids can keep the law of love by ourselves. We fall off and hurt ourselves. We hurt other people. But our heavenly Father offers us His hand in love. He offers us forgiveness for our failures. He gives us guidance in finding the Way. He supports us in doing right. Just as we pray to God for the things we need to sustain every day life, so we pray to God to enable us to live upright, good lives. We trust Him as well for our spiritual needs as we do for our physical needs.

A traditional father may seem distant – perhaps physically distant in that he is always out of the house and never has time for childish things, or emotionally distant in that he cannot easily express his love. God is never distant. St Paul says that human beings should learn their lesson from the wonders of the world: *That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being. For we are also his offspring.* God is not emotionally distant. He is love and love defines our relationship with Him.

Our best understanding of human fatherhood informs our understanding of the nature of God. Our understanding of what God is informs our understanding of what it is to be a father.

When Jesus taught us to call God, *Father*, He gave us a very precious gift. It is a wonderful thing to live as a child of God.