

Sunday 18 June 2017 (First Sunday of Trinity) (Father's Day)

St Andrew's, Cobham

Genesis 18.1-15; Romans 5.1-8; Matthew 9.35-10.8

Father's Day in the Kingdom of Heaven

Today is Father's Day, and may I wish all of you out there who are fathers, stepfathers or father figures in someone's life a wonderful day in which you get some of the recognition you deserve for the wonderful job I'm sure you all do.

It often takes a day like Father's Day to make children appreciate the men who care for them. I read a story the other day about a mother and her little boy returning home after a trip away. The mother was overheard telling the little boy, 'Now remember, when we get home, run to dad first, and *then* the dog.'

The love of a father or a father-figure in one's life can create a strong sense of worth and security. I love the story of the teenage girl going on a date. When her date arrived to pick her up, her father said to him, 'Make sure you have my daughter home by midnight. I'll be here waiting and cleaning my gun.' She was probably horribly embarrassed but the lesson that she was precious would have registered at some level.

With all this in mind, I wanted to reflect today on an image of God that is so central to our Christian faith – the image of God as a loving father.

For most of us, this is an image of great comfort and inspiration. But for some people this image can cause real difficulties, and I will come to those in due course.

But first, let's have a look at how and why the image of God as father has come to be so central to us. Of course, the source of this image is the Bible.

The Bible is really the history of God revealing to us his true nature, so that through knowing him properly, we can become what we are meant to be.

The Old Testament records how God chose one nation, the nation of Israel, to hammer into them the true picture of God's power and holiness. There are many images of God there – Lord, king, saviour, redeemer, lawgiver, holy one, even husband and lover. But in the whole of the Old Testament there are probably only ten verses describing him as father, and then usually in the sense of the father of a nation.

Then when the time was right, God gave us his final revelation of what he is really like, in and through the person of Jesus.

And as Jesus taught and showed us what God is like, there was one image he used more than any other: the image of God as father. Jesus refers to him as Father hundreds of times. But he goes a step further by using the word 'Abba' to describe the type of father God is. 'Abba' is an Aramaic word that roughly means 'daddy' but without the baby-talk connotation, in a way that shows warmth and intimacy between father and child.

And so Jesus introduces to us a picture of a God who has authority and who insists on good behaviour, but who is also approachable, warm, loving and intimate – in other words, like the perfect father.

But why the image of a father?

I suggest that it is a way to get across to us the idea that in the person of Jesus we see what God is really like. In other words, like Father, like Son. Jesus is not just another man who comes along and teaches about God. He is God's Son, and so there is a family resemblance, so to speak, that we can rely on to understand from the Son what the Father is like.

Let's take the example of our reading from Matthew this morning. It describes how Jesus taught, healed and had compassion; how he reminded us that God gives freely, and so must we. In all this, through the words and actions of the Son, we see the parent - a parent who loves us, and who wants us to be wise and healthy and happy and safe and generous.

And now we come to the difficulties that I mentioned earlier.

The first problem is that for many people, their experience of fatherhood is one of neglect, abuse or just plain absence. The BBC reported in 2013 that a million children were growing up without a father in their lives. And so this negative experience can be a real barrier to loving a God described as a father.

For example, we read that many of the famous atheists either lost their fathers at an early age or had very poor relationships with them. This is certainly true of Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, David Hume, Jean-Paul Sartre and Voltaire. Also, many feminists reject the idea of God as father, because for them it supports a society that oppresses women.

How are people who have been hurt by their experience of fatherhood meant to relate to a God described as Father?

All I can suggest and hope is that the image of the Father that we see in the Son will help them to be healed.

When we can replace our negative experience with a sense of the true fatherhood that we see expressed in Jesus, this can bring healing and wholeness. Jesus shows us that *his* father is also *our* father. His Abba is our Abba, a father of warmth and intimacy, whose hands comfort, protect and give, rather than strike and withhold. To receive in our heavenly father what we may have lacked in our earthly father can be a source of healing for the emotions and the spirit.

And where this is not possible, there are other images of God to be found in the Bible that we can turn to, including the image of God as mother. For example, Jesus said, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings...” [Matthew 23.37]. God is father but he is not just father.

The next difficulty with an image of God as loving father is one we experience when we see things such as the horror of the Grenfell Tower fire. In the face of such suffering, and of all the suffering in the world, we might have serious doubts that God is a loving father.

Of course, the problem of how a good God can allow suffering is a huge topic that has troubled people for thousands of years, so I can't begin to do it justice today.

But I believe there is great comfort and hope to be had from Jesus' portrayal of God as Father. One of the main things that Jesus did was to preach that the kingdom of heaven was breaking into this world, as we heard in our reading this morning [Matthew 9.35]. In other words, God is at work re-making the world and will ultimately turn it into what it is meant to be – a place of joy and peace where there is no more suffering. This is not how it is meant to be, and it is not how it ends. So God the father is not a remote father who has abandoned us to this broken world. He is a father who knows that things are not right, and who is fixing them. We suffer now, but like a true father, God suffers with us – as we see on the Cross - and is working to make it right.

And so now, as I draw to a close, I wish all of you the joy of knowing God as a loving father, and I wish all of you fathers, stepfathers and father-figures out there a day of love and appreciation for all that you do.

May God the Father bless us all.