

Bedmond, Fathers Day, June 18 2017

Part One

Imagine yourself living long before our scientific technological era, before our understanding of the natural world, our times of weather forecasts , Springwatch and David Attenborough Planet Earth programmes; before even the development of the World Religion systems – Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the like. You're vaguely aware that there is some sort of Power, some Governor and controller of the forces of the universe, some deity, God, for want of a better word. You feel in your innermost being that whatever that deity might be you need to have some sort of relationship with it. Attitudes like worship, awe, respect, fear govern your thinking.

I wonder what descriptive words and mind-pictures would come into your mind to describe that being? I imagine words like Terrible, Awesome, Majestic, Fearful, Omnipotent would very easily dictate your understanding of and your relationship with that deity, that God.

I somehow doubt whether the word Father would be one that would naturally come into your mind.

Whatever else today may be, for many of us it is primarily Fathers Day. Fatherhood and our understanding of God as Father will be our overriding theme today. How could it possibly come about that God would be thought of as Father; what does fatherhood involve; what does that tell us about how we should react with God.

We can reflect together on something of all that as we sing the Hymn 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind'.

Part Two

Being a father has been, without a doubt, my greatest source of achievement, pride and inspiration. Fatherhood has taught me about unconditional love, reinforced the importance of giving back and taught me how to be a better person. No, I didn't just say that – it was a quotation from Naveen Jain, a high-powered financial whizz-kid and entrepreneur who has pioneered several things in the mysterious world of micro-technology. He is a Jain, an Indian religion based largely on the practice of harmlessness and renunciation.

For me, the most important thing in that quotation is the concept of fatherhood being about 'unconditional love' – and in case you think I'm starting to get sexist, yes, I know it is what all parenthood is meant to be about. But today does happen to be Fathers day so I think I'm entitled to be a bit gender-specific.

I had an interesting discussion in the Church Office this week about where the apostrophe should come in Fathers Day, before or after the S! If it's a day for us each to reflect on our own fathers, then the apostrophe should come before the S; if, however, it is meant to be a day earmarked for fathers generally, then it comes after the S, signifying 'fathers' (plural) day. We couldn't agree, so I left it to the Office to decide where to put the apostrophe. As you can see, their decision was to put it before the S, which is where it is put in nearly every card or article about the day. In actual fact, there probably shouldn't be an apostrophe at-all! Two different stories about the origins of the day both tell of a woman who, on hearing a sermon on Mothering Sunday and reflecting on terrible loss of life by fathers in either a mining accident or in war approached their minister to ask whether we shouldn't have a day in the year when fathers are remembered and commemorated. The day is, therefore, originally, a day to reflect on and remember 'fathers' as opposed to 'mothers' (well, not, I hope, actually 'opposed') rather than a day belonging to either a father or fathers (plural) and, in consequence, needs no apostrophe at-all. I hope that's all quite clear. It has, though, nothing at-all to do with what I want to say about fatherhood and our understanding of God!

It's wellnigh impossible to work out when and why God came to be thought of in terms of fatherhood, rather than as an omnipotent, distant and inaccessible deity to be feared and kept at bay by carefully worked out systems of ritual worship and sacrifice. We do know that by the time a psalmist wrote what we know as Psalm 103, some 500 years or so before the time of Christ, it was possible for him to write " Just as a father is tender towards his own children, even so is the Lord tender towards those who fear him... ", without that notion appearing to strike incredulity in the minds of his readers. It says something of the strong organic link between Judaism and Christianity that for worshippers from both religions, the notion of God as Father is something to be assumed without contradiction.

We, of course, take our understanding of the nature of God from the life and teachings of Jesus, whom we see as God living and speaking in human form. And it was, of course, Jesus who, when asked by his followers to teach them how to pray, said "when you pray, say 'our Father...'

I'm sure we're all aware that the Aramaic word Jesus is thought to have used and which we translate as 'father' is Abba as in the hymn 'Abba, Father, let me be yours and yours alone' – (not, of course, as in Abba the Swedish singing group whose name is derived from the initial letters of their individual names!) I remember hearing on a number of occasions in my younger faith-days preachers focussing on the familiarity of the title 'abba' as the Aramaic equivalent of our childish word 'daddy'. Certainly the word does express childlike, rather than childish, notions of 'warm affection and filial obedience'. It's one of those words which actually has no perfect equivalent in our language – rather like our word 'home' with all its connotations not having any equivalent in the French language; it's neither 'chez nous', which is where we live, nor 'notre maison', which is where we do our living, but something so much more which is difficult to define. In the same way, Abba means so much more than just the childish 'daddy', and yet carries all the meaning that a child can put into that word! Daddy! Recent scholarship suggests that the word as used by Jesus when he taught us how to pray is not so much the word one might expect from a young child, but more a term of learned respect as from an adult child. Hence, when we speak to God as

a child does to its father, we also approach him as the one whose name we hallow, respect, We also want his way of life to be followed and adhered to – or, as the prayer puts it, his Kingdom to come and his will to be done. We go on to say that we rely on him as our provider who will, symbolically, ‘give us our daily bread’. We’re aware of and are glad to express his unconditional love which forgives our sins, however little we may deserve that, and that leads us to have the same forgiving attitude towards people we feel have caused us harm. Just like any earthly father we, the children so to speak, do expect him to steer us away from the kind of behaviour that is likely to cause us harm, just as we trust his fatherhood to stand somehow between us and whatever is threatening us – or, as Jesus taught us to put it, not to lead us into temptation but to deliver us from evil.

That’s what fatherhood is all about. Yes, I know, and motherhood too! It’s about behaving in such a way towards our children that they find themselves respecting and ‘hallowing’ us, despite reservations about what they sometimes think about us! It’s about setting them a pattern of life they respect enough to want to be established in their own lives and their own families. It’s about providing for their needs without inducing in them a greed for things that are way above what they need for life to be fulfilling and satisfying. It’s about accepting them as they are and forgiving what they have been, encouraging them to be as accepting and forgiving towards their own children as well as their friends – or even their enemies. It’s about setting them a way of life that will prevent them from choices that will only cause them harm, and it’s about trying to come between them and whatever might be a threat to their wellbeing. It’s about ‘being there’, even when they are not aware of it.

That’s what Jesus was telling us about the nature and character of God when he taught his followers to say “Our Father...” And that’s what will be in our minds on this Fathers Day when, in our Communion Prayer, we will all say that prayer together as fellow members with all creation of that worldwide family of whom he is Father.