

## Homily – 06-09-20 - Pentecost 14 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:1-10; Matthew 18:15-20

For more than seventy countries in the world Father's Day is celebrated on the third Sunday in June, however for four countries in the Pacific - Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Papua New Guinea - Father's Day is celebrated on the first Sunday in September... which is today. So, for all of you who are Dads, step-Dads, foster Dads, Grandads, Poppies, and father figures - we give thanks for you, and for the blessing you are in the lives of those children and grandchildren who look to you for love and support.

However, as we do this I recognise that there are some in our congregations who have longed to be parents but that this has not been possible. So, the Father's Day focus of this day is for them a tough one. Similarly, some people have not had a positive experience of being fathered and instead of sustained love have experienced sustained indifference, and abuse. Consequently there can be an understandable mixture of hurt, grief, and anger about past and present experience and contribute to what some psychologists identify specifically as a 'father wound'.

I have often wondered how those who have had a traumatic experience of being fathered feel about calling God 'father' and through the years have learnt much from listening. Some people embrace the understanding of God as 'father' because their own experience of being fathered was so awful, while others because of their experience cannot name God as father and instead use other terms like 'Creator', 'Loving God', and 'Holy One'.

According to Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray he referred to God as 'your Father' five times (Matthew 6:1; Matthew 6:4; Matthew 6:6; & Matthew 6:8), before introducing the prayer known as the 'Lord's Prayer'. In this we are invited to begin, 'Our Father in heaven...'

This naming of God as Father, or Dad if we used the Aramaic word Abba, was such a radical departure from the naming of God over many centuries by Jewish faith and teaching. In this God was considered too powerful to be limited by a name! So, when Moses asked God at the burning bush who it was that was sending him back to Egypt the best he got was, 'I AM WHO I AM...', tell them 'I AM has sent me...' (Exodus 3:14).

But understanding God as a heavenly father is an important aspect of Christian belief and there are two Biblical references I'd particularly like us to bear in mind as we think about God as Father.

One of the parenting practices of northern England used to be that the father of the family was the dispenser of discipline in the home. 'Just wait 'til your father comes home...' was not necessarily understood as something to look forward to because the physical penalty for playing up would be delivered by the father. It could be an open-handed smack, or a number of strikes from a belt... but, for sure, it was going to hurt. So... father as punisher for breaking the rules, and God as punisher for breaking the commandments seem to sit pretty-well side by side.

However, Jesus not only named God differently he suggested a much more generous and loving understanding of God. I think particularly of the parable he is remembered sharing in Luke's Gospel known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This is rightly one of the best-known parables and an

alternative name could be the Parable of the Loving Father. In this the father is treated shamefully by his younger son but when that same son comes back, broken by the choices he has made, his father does not give him a thrashing. He does not write him out the family or lecture him about where he went wrong. Instead he welcomes him home with a hug and kiss; he gets him some new clothes and throws a huge welcome home party. If you've forgotten this parable then I do encourage you to reread it this week and you'll find it in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel.

I interpret this parable to mean that God, like a loving father, never stops loving us - even when we make terrible choices in life. God, like a loving father, never stops loving us and is always ready to welcome us home into a loving hug and a new chapter of life.

I think today's Gospel develops this radical understanding of a God who loves way beyond our human capacity to understand. It's another parable and in this Jesus tells his listeners about a shepherd who not only recognises when one of his sheep has gone missing, he leaves the rest of the flock to go and find the one who is lost.

When we bring these two parables together we are given some extraordinary insight into the nature of God. God not only waiting like a father to welcome home a wilful child, but also like a shepherd seeking out those who have become lost or entangled in thorns.

How would you express your understanding of God? Do you lean more towards the God who punishes rule breakers together with their children and their children's children; or the loving father who is willing to forgive the unforgiveable, and the shepherd who will actively seek us out when we lose our way?

Friends, please join with me in prayer:

Loving Father, and compassionate shepherd,  
We give thanks for the mystery and gift of our lives;  
And for those who have raised us and cared for us.  
In your grace help us to be more generous in our loving this week,  
And more diligent in our seeking out of those who have lost their way.  
We pray in the name of the who taught us to pray,  
'your will be done on earth as in heaven'  
Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen