

SERMON FOR TRINITY 2/FATHER'S DAY | 21.06.2020

2 Samuel 18: 9-15; Ephesians 5: 25 – 6: 4; St Luke 15: 11-32

Father's Day: was that invented by Hallmark or Clinton's cards by any chance - a kind of way of balancing all the hype that goes along with Mother's Day on the 4th Sunday of Lent?! Well no: there was a celebration of fathers in the medieval Church, focused on the feast of St Joseph on March 19th. But the modern form is indeed American, first organized before the 1st World War by Grace Clayton after she had lost her own father quite young. It didn't become a national holiday in the US until 1972 and we have gradually adopted it in Britain too – albeit still in a muted form compared with what happens on the other side of the pond.

But a UK blogger, writing about the difference between mother's day and father's day cards, said: *what struck me was how much less emphasis there was on the uniqueness of fatherhood - or on the loving bond between a father and his child. The cards always seem to emphasise what a father does rather than how they act or feel. While Father's Day is, at its core, still unquestionably about love, it's just a bit more ... hidden. It's more like when two brothers engage in friendly, even heated, banter. You know there is love hiding in there, it just isn't quite so obvious.*

I am not sure whether that is entirely true but if it is, I guess it may be said to be part of our English culture: something about the way men relate emotionally, but differently, from women.

But what took my attention rather more seriously this week was a wealth of scientific studies on the effect of growing up without a father figure. Some of the stories were really quite harrowing.

Without being sidetracked by too much detail, there are said to be six marks which distinguish the lives of children who have either no father at home or whose father is not engaged with their child. According to the research such children are more likely to be more aggressive, more likely to suffer from depression, less likely to share with others and make strong friendships, more likely to have low esteem, less likely to be educationally successful and more likely to break rules.

That is a pretty daunting list and needs far more unpacking than I have time for this morning. But it does go some way to helping us understand what is going on in parts of our British society where men are disconnected from their children's emotional upbringing – whether it is the children of affluent workaholic fathers who are never at home or the offspring of men who disappear from the lives of their sons and daughters on our great sink estates.

How can a child navigate their way through all the emotional challenges of life unless they have worked them through with two parents who love them 'whatever'? I have been reading stories - all too readily available on the net - of boys in particular, forced to grow up all too quickly on our city's streets because there was no father figure to guide them. It made you want to cry.

But none of this is straightforward. The fathers themselves were often at a total loss as they watched, with a growing sense of powerlessness, what is happening to their children.

Which is the background to the story of King David and his eldest son Absalom. David may have been a great military leader, a King who finally brought peace to the people of Israel – but he was a pretty bad father. He simply wasn't around for most of the time and was pretty remote and distracted even when he was at home. As we know he also had a roving eye. So is it any wonder that Absalom lacks any self-discipline and eventually ends up leading a rebel army against his father? He is the archetypal 'spoilt brat' so that when he is caught by Joab in the forest after a particularly bloody battle, the army chief of staff has no hesitation in running the boy through with a set of javelins, royal son and all.

King David, back at home, is on tenterhooks. He knows perfectly well what might happen to him if Absalom won the battle, but his father's heart still couldn't stop him worrying that some harm had come to his son. As he waits, he knows too that many of the problems between them lay at his door. He had been a terrible parent and he knew it. So when David hears that Absalom had been killed, he is wracked with grief - but a grief mixed with guilt ever and remorse too. If he had been a better father, none of this may have happened. We can hear King David's pain all these years later: *O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you - O Absalom, my son, my son!*"

In today's Gospel, there is no suggestion that the landowner had not been a perfectly good father to both his sons. We get the impression that he may have been a bit strict but not so terrifying that the younger son was unable to ask for his half of the inheritance when it suited him. He asks – and he gets - what he asks for.

And everyone – apart from the younger son of course – knows that it is a bad call. He isn't ready for the responsibility and we know it will all go terribly wrong...

How many of us parents have had sleepless nights when our children have wanted something to happen, have had to make big decisions, have fallen out with friends or have just wasted opportunities given to them? And what have we parents tried to do? We have stood by them, offering what advice we could – and we have never stopped loving them, however difficult the experience. Schools, friendships, exams, money, partners, places to live: we have seen it all and worried ourselves sick more times than enough. And still our children have suffered and we haven't been able to shield them from it. It was, it is, never easy being a parent.

We have instinctively known those six marks of a fatherless child – and we have hoped and prayed that we have been able to protect our children from every single one of them. At least we have tried to. And we have absorbed the pain that our children have suffered – and sometimes, too, the pain they have inflicted on us.

And yet we wouldn't want it any other way. Playing frisbee last Sunday afternoon in the Leicestershire countryside with Sinead, with Catriona and her husband Daniel, celebrating an early Father's Day and even more a chance to be together for the first time for four months, we told each other stories drawn from the deep well of our family life. We haven't got everything right – by no manner of means – but there in the sunshine we were able to celebrate the power of love, commitment, time and the ability to know and to forgive. Sadly, we couldn't hug each other – and we missed that terribly – but despite the distances we had had to drive, our love and our shared histories made it vital that we spent that time together because it was a vital part of making us who we are.

As we read 2 Samuel we know, sadly, that Absalom never knew that life-enhancing love; and in the Gospel we realise that the young Prodigal only came to know what his father's love was all about after he had turned himself around.

Yet I draw on these stories, and talk about the joy my family give me, with some difficulty. My own parents split up when I was two and a half and I had a pretty difficult relationship with my father until he was killed in a car accident when I was thirty. The reading I have been doing this week has been resonating so clearly with my own experience and I understand only too clearly where those six marks of a fatherless child come from.

But while, unfortunately, many of these traits, laid in my childhood, are there 'for ever' and are beyond my ability to completely overcome them, my trust in a Father God who stands by me, accepts me and continues to love me has been my saving grace. Like the Father in the Gospel there has always been a way back; better than that there has always been a welcome back and a celebration purposefully designed to overcome those self-induced feelings of isolation and loneliness that can so often seem overwhelming.

Without any other model to hand, I don't use the words 'Father God' lightly. But it is only by being held by God – and by my family - that I have been able to be a Father in my own right, learning by experience at least some of the skills which were not available when I was younger.

As we celebrate Father's Day, as we think of all that is best in family life where children are able to depend on two parents, we thank God for his patience and his unswerving support, praying that we will do all we can to reveal the love of our Father God to all who need him.