**SERMON FOR TRINITY 3 / FATHER’S DAY | 20.06.21**

**Job 38: 1-11; 2 Corinthians 6: 1-13; St Mark 4: 35-41**

**She’s riding a very pretty pink bike. It used to have stabilisers attached but she is too old to be seen with those these days and - in any case - she doesn’t need them because her dad is running alongside, holding onto her saddle. And she is doing really well.**

**Except that her dad couldn’t keep up and some way back, stopped holding onto the saddle and his daughter – not noticing – carried on without him. It is a story that any dad will remember.**

**But not without a slight pang. It was rather nice to be needed, to have someone calling out *don’t let me go, daddy; I’ll fall off if you don’t hold me…* Now she has got beyond that point and is increasingly independent. And not just independent but critical and self assured too, no longer simply accepting that if he said something then it must be true.**

**Quite coincidentally the readings for today very helpfully take us to three places we are likely to need to visit when we think, not just of the changing relationship between parents and their children – but also when we think of our relationship with God. And if I may, I would like to give us time this morning to look back … to look at those times when we ourselves passed through those major thresholds and to reflect on how successfully we navigated those transitions.**

**And I have to admit that I can’t do this exercise without a certain amount of difficulty as my parents split up when I was two and a half and my working relationship with my own father was meagre to say the least. Sadly I have to reflect, all these years on, that I was never, ever, able to rely on him for anything. And I am sure that has coloured my life in a particular way – though I am hardly unique in not having had a father at home. I will come back to that later.**

**For now, today’s Gospel gives us such a vivid picture, Jesus’ boat one of a small flotilla of vessels caught by one of those frequent and quite terrifying squalls that affect inland lakes. We can read it literally and we can also see St Mark’s use of the gale as a metaphor for some disaster or another that blows up in our lives out of nowhere. You know these experiences very well: sudden bad luck, bad health, broken friendships or missed opportunities hit us with unrelenting force; what are we to do? And in the depth of our misery we cry out for help, yes, but for parental-type help in particular. *I’m struggling, I am hurting, I am at a loss to know what to do.* What do the disciples say after they wake Jesus up: *don’t you care that we are all going to drown?!*  *It’s bad enough coping with the gale, with the crisis – but you don’t seem to care!* We can all get very adolescent at times like that!**

**In Beau Stevenson’s classic ‘Transactional analysis’ model it is straightforward child-to-parent talk.**

**The first reading - the passage from Job - on the other hand, speaks of the exasperated parent of a typical teenager, the Dad who has had enough: out of the whirlwind (or better still, in the middle of the screaming and shouting), God seems to have lost his temper: *you just don’t know what you are talking about! h*e says. *Why don’t you look at the evidence before sounding off like this? You’re just an idle, johnny-come-lately, nowhere to be seen when the real hard graft was being done. And even now you still don’t have a clue about the complexity of the things you so easily take for granted…* It is the mid teen stand-off; not pretty with no one willing to give an inch!**

**And yet those rows are often the places of greatest learning, the ‘safe-space’ where we use those who we know care about us as punch bags, the people who we can rely on to work with us through the issues and the emotional roller-coaster that often goes with finding our voice and our way of looking out at the world. In Job we get the *Say what you like to me, but I will never walk out on you* kind of dad.**

**Our third example, taken from the second reading, is an example which takes this one stage further. St Paul is trying to get the talented but still immature Corinthian Church to see how to take their responsibilities seriously. *I have spoken frankly to you* is just ‘Paul-speak’ for *how many times do I need to spell out the obvious?! N*either Paul nor the Corinthians were particularly good at holding back! But what he does here is to try to win them over by listing all the things he has had to endure to enable them to have a clear understanding of what Christian ministry was all about: *afflictions, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights and hunger.* Paul doesn’t spare them from feeling guilty on his behalf!  *Look at what I have done for you and this is how you treat me…***

**It is not an unfamiliar tool in the ‘Dad training manual’ – and in the wrong hands can even verge on feeling sorry for oneself – or, in this case, sounding just a bit like a much undervalued super-hero! Paul says he appealing to their hearts as well as their heads and of course the ideals he describes are absolutely right: we shouldn’t let other people’s views of us put us off – and poverty is not to be despised. No one disputes that we should take the opportunities when they come ‘and at the right time’ … but is this really the way to get the best out of those who look to us for help?**

**Three examples of being a father: the one who accepts our fears and deals with the situation for us; the one who challenges our ideas, and finally someone who sets out some ideals to work by.**

**At different times I guess we need different handling.**

**But if we reflect back on our own lives, on the crises and the traumas, the times when we really didn’t know where to turn, who was there for us? Were we lucky enough to have a dad, or a substitute father figure, who could offer us the right comfort and advice and support when we needed it?**

**If we had more time I might have shared with you this piece of paper. It is simply headed ‘Your life’s journey’ and it has a pathway and six boxes alongside. And what it aims to do is to get us to think about the big events in our lives – especially the really difficult ones – and to invite us to work out ‘who were the support mechanisms at those times’ … and how did they do it?**

**On retreats and on other occasions, I have had a go at this and, by and large, I have found that ‘just having someone there, loving me’ has been by far the most valuable thing. Of course it is lovely when someone can wade in and solve a particular crisis – calm the storm for us if you like; and sometimes we need good advice from people who have gone through an experience and can pass on good advice.**

**But most of all I have found that having a sympathetic friend - non-judgmental, patient and full of TLC – has been what has helped me most; and those who start with *If I were you…* have helped the least!**

**And it has been as part of that process that I have come face to face with my real walk with God. As I look at those boxes on my sheet I recall the way God has guided and supported me - through the bereavements, the natural loss of friends as we move on, at the frustrations when hopes and dreams have come shattering down.**

**Not many of my difficulties have been straightforward; there have been far too many deaths and far too many clashes with institutions of one sort or another! And it is at those times that the I have turned to Isaiah 43 and almost literally drunk in the reassurance that it gives:**

***But this is what the Lord says to those whom he has created and formed: fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I’ll be with you and when you walk through the fire you will not be burnt. Since you are precious and honoured in my eyes and because I love you, no one can deliver you out of my hands for when I act, who can reverse what I have done…***

**Strong or weak, wise or foolish, rich or poor, well or ill: what more can a Father be than the one who makes sure his children know how precious they are. As precious as we are to our Father God.**