

FATHERS' DAY

A SERMON FOR ST PAUL'S ANGLICAN. 7TH SEPTEMBER 2008

Today is Fathers' Day. In Australia and New Zealand at least. Fathers' Day, which, by the way should have the apostrophe AFTER the S ... Fathers' Day is celebrated all over the world, but on different days. Only Australia and New Zealand have it today. The most popular date is the third Sunday in June. Canada, the United States, Great Britain, China and 48 other countries have it on that date in June. But in case you think we're a bit late, we are still ahead of Nepal, Luxembourg, Estonia, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Thailand.

The origins of Fathers' Day are actually more obscure than the origins of the Garden of Eden. There's more than one version about how Fathers' Day came into existence. And from what I can tell, all the versions are American.

A hundred years ago this year, on July 5, 1908, a special memorial Fathers' Day service was held in the town of Fairmont, West Virginia in the United States. And a local holiday was declared in response to a mining disaster in which many of the fathers of the town were killed. This service is alleged to be the beginnings of Fathers' Day. Not sure how authentic this is. I just point out that Fairmont, West Virginia, USA is also renowned (if that's the right word) as the home of the original Pepperoni roll.

Another story goes that Fathers' Day is really just an after-thought. A woman by the name of Sonora Dodd in the town of Spokane in the United States was sitting in church during a Mothers' Day service about a hundred years ago and noticed that it was unfair that Mums got their special day, but Dads didn't. Her own Dad had been a single parent to six children after his wife died young, and Sonora chose his birthday, June 19 as the date to celebrate it.

So she started a campaign which was picked up with enthusiasm by the Mayor, and later by businesses who wanted to sell more socks, ties and men's toiletries. And today we have Fathers' Day pretty much all round the world.

I've been a Father now since 1972. For 36 years. And, it may surprise you to know that Judy has been a mother for exactly the same time.

But I have to say fathering has changed quite a lot since 1972.

In 1972, this father waited around for the doctor to tell him that the baby had arrived. Now a father must wear a hospital gown, know how to be a breathing coach, and how to work the video camera.

In 1972, this father looked forward to teaching his children how to ride a bicycle. Now a father waits for his children to come home so they can work the DVD player and program Foxtel.

In 1972, this father used to smoke a pipe. Now, such a father would be sent outdoors after a lecture from his children on the dangers of cancer.

In 1972, this father looked forward to gently shaking his kids awake and saying, "Wake up it's time for school." Now, a father is shaken awake at 4AM by his son who shouts, "Wake up, Dad, it's time for swim training!"

In 1972, this father would come home from work to find the family sitting around the dinner table waiting for him to say Grace. Now, a father comes home to a note: "Jay's at footy training, Tamara's at gymnastics, I'm at computer class, pizza's in the fridge."

In 1972, this father expected to have a heart-to-heart with his son while they went fishing. Now, fathers pull those little white earphones out of their son's ears and say, "When you have a minute!!"

I read somewhere recently, I think it was in Woman's' Day, that eventually the female reproductive system will evolve to make Fathers unnecessary. It would *have* to be in Woman's' Day right?

Well, apparently guys, this day is still pretty far off. So until that day comes there is one thing we can all say we have in common, and that is that we all have fathers. There may be some here who do not know their fathers. Perhaps father left the family when you were young. Or maybe you were a test tube baby. But in every case, until the Woman's Day prophesy comes true, there was a father involved somewhere. We all have that in common.

What we don't have in common is the kind of fathers we have. Some of us will remember our fathers with great fondness and love. Some of us will remember our fathers with misgivings—some good memories, some bad memories. Some of us will remember our fathers with such bitterness, even hatred, that we would prefer to forget them than remember them.

My own father was a hard-working, self-contained man. He hovered in the background of my childhood. My mother was much more in the foreground. An extroverted, demonstrative and fun mother. Dad seemed more serious. He worked long hours. Provided well for us. He was a presence more than part of our lives. You turned to him for advice and help. He made things for us. He was an engineer who could turn his hand to carpentry which meant that he expressed his love for me by building my whole bedroom furniture to our own design, but which also meant that I spent a lot of time in my bedroom and he spent a lot of time at his carpentry bench. He loved me and my sisters enough to buy us a car, but that meant he spent a lot of time in the garage repairing it for us.

My Dad was a man of culture and arts. When he preached, he quoted Shakespeare as much as the Scriptures. He listened to classical music and bought records every month from the World Record Club. He could conduct any choir, and sing any harmony part. He had never had the chance to learn a musical instrument, but he made sure me and my sisters had the opportunity.

He stayed in regular contact with his extended family. We saw our grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins a lot. For a few years we lived in *his* grandfather's house, caring for my great-grandfather in his last few years. And when his younger sister was diagnosed with cancer, he bought a house near her and he and Mum moved there to support her.

But he was not an easy man to hug. Even though, I am sure, he yearned to be hugged.

And, of course, I look in the mirror each day. And I see him. And I enjoy his legacy. And, as a father, I have tried to pass that legacy on.

But what about other fathers? What about your father? Like mine? Better? Worse?

A few weeks ago, I sat at a table with a young man who had been homeless and had been helped by the Melbourne Citymission. He told us his story. How at the age of 14 he had become the primary carer for a bipolar mother and a seven year old sister. How his mother would in fits of frantic activity shop extravagantly. "We got a nice expensive sofa for a few weeks until they repossessed it," he said. And his Mum almost got them on a first class trip to Thailand once. And then in the depths of depression that followed, she would turn violent with murderous fits that had this young teen, taking his little sister and escaping into the streets. Finally it became too much and he became one of those homeless people who sleep on any spare couch, and occasionally find themselves under a bridge, or in an alley somewhere.

At the age of 19, he found his way to Frontyard at the Melbourne Citymission and over the next two years through the program of support provided there, he got his life together. Today he's finishing a social work degree. And he wants to work among homeless youth.

As I thought about this young man later I realised that nowhere in his whole story had he mentioned his father. A father who, putting the pieces together, must have left them all when he was 14. And I wondered, where was his father? What kind of father would abandon such a family?

Doubtless for some among us today, a day that reminds you of your father is not a good day.

The actress Lindsay Lohan was reported this week as describing her father as a "public embarrassment" and a "bully." It would be an unusual group of this size in which there was no-one who recalled their father as a bully or a tyrant.

So what are we to say about fathers on Fathers' Day?

Well, I guess we can say they come in all kinds. A few great. A few evil. And most in between, sometimes terrific and sometimes terrifying.

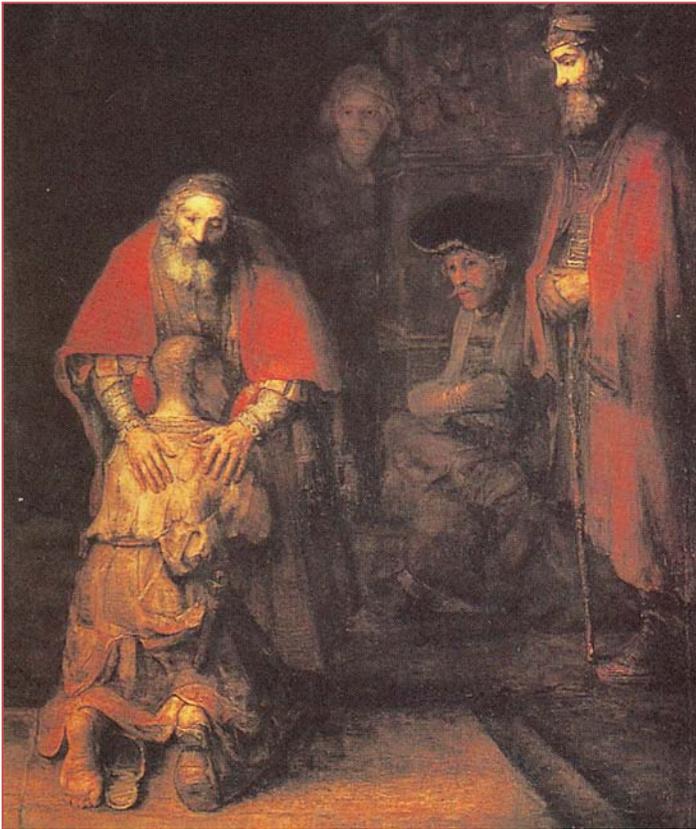
Now the theological problem we have is that God is described as God the Father. And if we don't carry around in our heads and hearts a good image of a father, this can colour our idea of what God is like.

I mean, if you suffered abuse from a violent father, then someone telling you that God is like a father is not helpful.

Well, fortunately, the Bible does not say that God the Father is like your father, and not like my father. Instead, Jesus described God the Father in the story we heard this morning. The story of the lost son, or the prodigal son. The story of the son who asks for his inheritance before the father is dead, who then goes and spends the inheritance in wasteful living, and then returns to beg employment with his own father.

The story is usually titled, “The Prodigal Son” but it really is a story about three people. The wasteful son is one. The other brother is the second person. And today I just want to suggest a few things about the third character in the story—the father.

Incidentally, I was reminded in preparing this sermon this week, that our friends, Annette and Charles Lovitt have just been in St Petersburg in Russia. The most famous painting of the prodigal son with his father and the other son, this painting by Rembrandt, hangs in the Hermitage in St Petersburg. I hope they saw it.



This painting is called “The Return of the Prodigal Son.” It’s the painting on the screen.

It portrays the Father welcoming the lost son home. The prodigal son kneels before the old man, the father. The father puts his hands on the back of the son. The older brother stands off to the right. And a couple of servants are visible in the shadows behind.

You know, you don’t have to have a theology degree to work out that Jesus was meaning for us to think of the Father as representing God the Father in this story. And maybe also to put ourselves in the place of one, or maybe actually, both of the sons.

The image of the father that Jesus portrays would have been quite extraordinary to his listeners in the first century. He is not a typical father of that time. Not at all.

That should help us, if we feel that sometimes our own fathers have been less than perfect.

God the Father is a special kind of Dad.

One of the startling things about Jesus’ image of the father in this story is the way he runs. Even today in Middle Eastern societies, the father figure of the family never runs anywhere. He is a stately figure. He glides along. The dignified pace of the Middle Eastern Patriarch is a sign of the Patriarch’s position in the society.

And what does this father do? He RUNS to greet his son.

There’s a saying in the Middle East that “A man’s manner of walking tells you what he is.” Aristotle said, “Great men never run in public.”

What the father is doing here is drawing dramatic attention to himself. And he's doing it to draw away from the returning son, the hostility of the community. He is protecting the son, and restoring him to fellowship within the community.

Yet, when Rembrandt decided to paint this picture of the return of the lost son, he does not present the father running. The old man stands. Hunched over his returned son. The father looks fragile. He is not hugging the boy like it actually says in the Bible. Indeed, the father looks like he might be blind. His hands touch the son's back as though he is experiencing the boy's return through his touch.

One of the great Christian men of the 20th Century was Henri Nouwen. Henri once travelled to the Hermitage in St Petersburg and sat for days in front of this great painting. He sat and contemplated and meditated on the meaning of the parable and the meaning of Rembrandt's interpretation of the parable.

I want to read just a few of his meditations because they give us some insights into what an exceptional father is our God.

Nouwen says:

It seems that the hands that touch the back of the returning son are the instruments of the father's inner eye. The near-blind father sees far and wide. His seeing is an eternal seeing, a seeing that reaches out to all of humanity. It is a seeing that understands the lostness of women and men of all times and places, that knows with immense compassion the suffering of those who have chosen to leave home, that cried oceans of tears as they got caught in anguish and agony. The heart of the father burns with an immense desire to bring his children home.

Oh, how much would he have liked to talk to them, to warn them against the many dangers they were facing, and to convince them that at home can be found everything that they search for elsewhere. How much would he have liked to pull them back with his fatherly authority and hold them close to himself so that they would not get hurt.

But his love is too great to do any of that. It cannot force, constrain, push or pull. It offers the freedom to reject that love or to love in return. It is precisely the immensity of the divine love that is the source of the divine suffering. God, creator of heaven and earth, has chosen to be, first and foremost, a Father.

As Father, he wants his children to be free, free to love. That freedom includes the possibility of their leaving home, going to a "distant country" and losing everything. The Father's heart knows all the pain that will come from that choice, but his love makes him powerless to prevent it. As Father, he desires that those who stay at home enjoy his presence and experience his affection. But here again, he wants only to offer a love that can be freely received. He suffers beyond telling when his children honour him only with lip service, while their hearts are far from him. He knows their "deceitful tongues" and "disloyal hearts," but he cannot make them love him without losing his true fatherhood.

As Father, the only authority he claims for himself is the authority of compassion. That authority comes from letting the sins of his children pierce his heart. There is no lust, greed, anger, resentment, jealousy, or vengeance in his lost children that has not caused immense grief to his heart. The grief is so deep because the heart is so pure. From the deep inner place

where love embraces all human grief, the Father reaches out to his children. The touch of his hands, radiating inner light, seeks only to heal.

Here is the God I want to believe in: a Father who, from the beginning of creation, has stretched out his arms in merciful blessing, never forcing himself on anyone, but always waiting; never letting his arms drop down in despair, but always hoping that his children will return so that he can speak words of love to them and let his tired arms rest on their shoulders. His only desire is to bless.

In Latin, to bless is benedicere, which means literally: saying good things. The Father wants to say, more with his touch than his voice, good things to his children. He has no desire to punish them. They have already been punished excessively by their own inner or outer waywardness. The Father wants simply to let them know that the love they have searched for in such distorted ways has been, is, and always will be there for them. The Father wants to say, more with his hands than with his mouth: "You are my Beloved, on you my favour rests." He is the shepherd, "feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast."

The true centre of Rembrandt's painting is the hands of the father. On them all the light is concentrated; on them the eyes of the bystanders are focussed; in them mercy becomes flesh; upon them forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing come together, and, through them, not only the tired son, but also the worn-out father find their rest.