



Reflections on Father's Day
21st June 2020

Christians are people who live in accordance with the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit Himself testifying with our spirit that we are God's children. A truth John also expresses in a beautiful and vivid way in his first letter: How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! We are children of God. He is our Abba, our heavenly Father, our Dad.

However being also people of human nature who have been pro-created by human fathers and raised up in worldly experiences we can fall into a comparison error when we consider our heavenly Father. We can look at Him through the experience of knowing our earthly fathers. They become our template for knowing Him.

If our earthly father is or was, despite his weaknesses and failures, good and kind and loving to us, so we may consider our heavenly Father. But if our earthly father is or was uncaring about us, unkind and ungentle in his treatment of us, or even worse, angry and abusive, that is also how we may see our heavenly Father. We may know through what's taught in Church and what we may read that that is not how our heavenly Father is, yet we may not be able to escape inversion – seeing our heavenly Father by the faults and failures of our earthly fathers.

No earthly father is perfect, even the best of them, and some of them are very imperfect, even seeming quite undeserving of the children they have fathered. We can also find some things very hard to understand about our heavenly Father. Especially if we fall into the often-repeated error of separating the God of the Old Testament from the God in Christ Jesus in the New Testament. Contrasting the picture of a wrathful, angry, stern-faced, judging God in the Old Testament, with a loving, kind, compassionate, forgiving God in Christ in the New Testament.

Over the last few evenings I've been re-reading Philip Yancey's book "Reaching for the invisible God". As I saw it on my book shelves I felt

drawn to re-read it. In reading I came yesterday to his writing of the experience of Roberta Bondi, a professor of Church history. She, Yancey, writes had long struggled with the phrase, God the Father. Mainly because her earthly father had been for her a harsh and distant figure. He tolerated no imperfections or weakness, no disobedience from his children or wife. He had a clear picture of the woman's place: sweet, and pliant, quiet and submissive. But Roberta could never be such a daughter. She went through childhood bearing a burden of failing her father. He left the family before she was 12. She saw him only yearly after that. Anger infected her. And if she heard someone say, 'God the Father' the anger flared up.

In her career she studied the 'early church fathers' who revealed a different view of God the heavenly Father, a gentle God who loves the ones the world despises, who understands our weaknesses, temptations and sufferings. That led her to try to use the word 'Father' in prayer. But still she struggled with the idea of God as Father. Then she came to read in John, Jesus' last conversations with His disciples. In them He talks about going away to His Father, but, as ever the disciples don't understand, and Philip blurts out, "Lord, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us." Jesus answers, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

Those words, 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' struck Roberta. If Jesus shows special concern for the poor, widows, and social rejects then so does the Father. If Jesus has women friends and values them, so does the Father. If Jesus weeps with Mary and Martha and allows them to scold Him for being late when Lazarus dies, if they can pour out their grief and hurt and anger to Jesus, if all this and more is so, then Roberta realised that she had wrongly projected her fractured image of fatherhood, drawn from her earthly father onto God her heavenly Father. Through the lens of Jesus, God made visible, she saw the Father anew. She realised that He is the corrective to all our experience of human fathers who fall short.

I invite you to pause here and in the silence to pray a prayer of forgiveness over our earthly fathers for all their falling short towards us. If that's hard for you, pray that God the Holy Spirit would help you to start to find the way forgive your father.

And if reflecting on your father raises anxiety, worries, fears and even memories of abuse for you please contact Elinor and/or me, for we would willingly meet with you in a healing process to help you step out of your suffering, not by our giftings but by and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

And let's also pray that as we grow closer to Jesus we will become more and more aware of the truth that we have a heavenly Father who has lavished His love upon us, who yearns for His children to know Him and come Home to Him. May His love in and through Christ Jesus break through any false images of Him that may have been painted in our beings by the failures and faults of our earthly fathers. In Christ's name I pray. Amen.

Nick

[please note that the words written and the words spoken may vary]