



TAKEAWAY SUNDAY SERMON

22nd October 2023, 21st Sunday after Pentecost,

Our Father in Heaven by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

2 In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. 3 Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. 4 He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more. 5 O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord! Isaiah 2:2-5

25 At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Matthew 11:25-30

I suggested last week that prayer is first and foremost about listening rather than speaking. It's about stilling our minds enough to attend to God and God's good purposes for us and our world.

But it raises the question: who are we listening to? Who is this God to whom we pray? It may seem a simple question, but the answer I think is often more complex than we

might think. And that's because we human beings project. We project ourselves, our experiences, and our cultural context onto God. Both the biases and prejudices we hold, as well as our insecurities, our traumas, our fears. The ways we think about God are pre-packaged, pre-formed, before we come to God in prayer. And that affects how we pray to God. And what we expect from God.

A popular image of God, for instance, is of God as a judge. [Slide] It's an image that has grounding in scripture, but which has come to dominate popular conceptions. We imagine God as a lonely and impartial ruler sitting atop his throne, weighing up whether to hear our desperate pleas or not. We trust this God will be fair, but we're also uncertain whether we've been good enough to tip the scales of justice in our favour.

As if Jesus' saving death has granted an audience with this God – it got us into the courtroom – but ultimately we don't know who this judge is and whether we've done enough to earn his mercy. Jesus is on our side. But the heavenly Judge? Well, we're not so sure.

And that affects how we pray, I think. The guilt we carry becomes a barrier to feeling worthy or accepted by God. We might bring a transactional mindset. Yes, God loves me... but I still need to earn God's favour.

There's a whole history as to why the image of God as impartial judge has been a, if not the, dominant image of God in protestant Christianity and consequently in popular Western conceptions of God. I'm not going to get into that history today, but I want to suggest that's not the primary way that we are think about God – at least as Jesus would have us think about God.

Far from an impartial judge, Jesus instructs us in the Lord's Prayer to pray to God as loving Abba. Abba is a Swedish pop-group from the 70s. But before that it was also the Aramaic term for Father. A term that is both

respectful and also intimate and endearing. This Lord of heaven and earth, who crafted the mountains and contained the oceans, Jesus claims, is none other than our loving Father. And we are to address him as such. With confidence.

When you pray, therefore, imagine a God who is not impartial, waiting to be convinced of your worthiness. Imagine a God who, no matter what you've done or said, is very much partial and already convinced of your worth. Already kindly and passionately disposed towards your wellbeing. Something more reminiscent, I think, of Rembrandt's Return of the Prodigal Son painting, in which God is likened to a loving father [Slide].

There's a problem though. Inevitably with a name like Father, we project something of our own experiences of fatherhood and of masculinity onto God. For each of us that experience will be different. For some of us it will be largely positive. But for many, who may have had negative father figures in their lives, to call God Father may actually be unhelpful or, worse, retraumatizing. We can't simply leave our baggage at the door. Nor would God want us to.

All that to say that, while the name Father is central to Jesus' imagining of God, if Father language is unhelpful to you in your relationship with God, then don't use it. I

don't think that Jesus would force the point and insist that you call God Father even if it's a barrier for you.

And that's because I don't think Jesus is suggesting that God is male or masculine or bound by human models of fatherhood. Jesus is saying something different when he calls God Father.

Consider our gospel reading today: [Slide] "All things," Jesus says, "have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

It's a bit cryptic. But what I'm wanting to draw your attention to, is that the name Father has nothing to do with maleness. The focus for Jesus is the intimate and secret union between God the Father and God the Son.

Jesus is stressing their unity. To know Jesus is to know God. And to know God is to know Jesus. They are united in will. Of one heart and mind. The Gospel of John uses similar language, when Jesus says, the Father and I are one.

So the point Jesus is making is not that God is like a human father. The point he's making is that we know the God we're praying to because we know Jesus.

There is no God hidden behind Jesus. No unknown and mysterious judge sitting in his courtroom, shrouded in cloud, whose verdict remains hidden. When we pray, there is only the God who is one with Christ. And his only judgement is the judgement of self-sacrificing love on the cross and wholehearted acceptance.

To know Christ is to know what the Father is like. That's the great secret of the gospel and the great secret of our prayer life: that the unknown God has become known. And in Jesus we learn that that God is a God of love and compassion and endless grace, who has invites each and every one of us into intimated union with him. Amen?

Just before I move on from this point, I want to finish it by saying when you pray to God, the important thing is to choose a name that, for you, conveys intimacy, nearness, trustworthiness, unconditional belonging. That's what Jesus means when he calls God Father. And for many of us, that will be the name we use. But it doesn't need to be – especially if that word is unhelpful or a barrier for you.

You may notice that, while we do use the name Father here at St Heliers (like in our opening song), I try to accompany that name with a range of other titles and images for God, some of which will be non-gendered and others of which may be gendered in a feminine way.

For example, the Bible describes God as a mothering hen. One of our hymns addresses God as the "womb of life" and the "source of being". Stunning language that enriches our imagination of God and helps to break down those masculine popular conceptions of God.

You may notice that sometimes I reword hymns slightly to removed male pronouns for God. It's a small, but significant way of starting to reshape our imagination of God away from a very gendered and masculine imagination.

... ok. I want to change tack. [Slide] You might be wondering why I've chosen the well-known Banksy artwork of a rioter throwing a bunch of flowers rather than a Molotov cocktail. What's that got to do with everything I've said so far?

Well, admittedly, not a lot – hence the change of tack. We've been focusing so far on the word Father as a term of intimate endearment towards God. Prayer, I'm suggesting, is about intimate communion with God who is known in Jesus Christ.

...but it's not just about communion with God. Because in the Lord's Prayer, Father is preceded by another word. We are not to pray to my Father in heaven. Instead, Jesus instructs us to pray to "our Father". This is a corporate prayer. It's a prayer that, even when we pray it alone, reminds us of our unbreakable and intimate connection with others.

For my doctorate, I studied the work of someone called Eduard Thurneysen, a Swiss pastor, who ministered during the two world wars. I remember a particular letter he wrote to his friend Karl Barth during the First World War, where he said something to this effect:

"It remains an intolerable contradiction that we raise arms to God in prayer even as we raise arms against our brother and sister in war."

To pray "Our Father", Thurneysen argued, is to recognise our intimate bond with every human being. To pray "Our Father" is to commit to learning to see every person as a beloved child of God and as a beloved sibling of incalculable worth and value. To pray "Our Father" is to lament where that is not the case.

We are mindful of Israel and Gaza at this time. But we could also pray for Ukraine and Russia. Or for South and North Korea. Or for the aboriginal peoples in Australia. Or for our own divided country, divided communities, divided families. "Our Father..." is a prayer of lament that needs no more words.

And yet it's also a prayer that creates new beginnings. A prayer of hope and unity between human siblings that invites new words, new dialogue and mutual understanding.

For God, we find out in Christ, is loving Father. Father of Jew, Christian and Muslim. Of Hindu, Buddhist, and atheist. Of Arab, Caucasian, Pasifika, Asian and Māori. The list could go on.

It's really quite that simple. And yet a truth, Jesus says, that is hidden from the wise and intelligent but knowable to infants, who in their innocence are blind to religious difference or the colour of one's skin. It's this truth that Jesus has made known to us. By his way of suffering love, and through his saving death and renewing life, we know it. And when we pray Our Father, we proclaim it.

And because we know it and proclaim, we're called to work towards it. To live the way of suffering love. To be peacemakers. Or as Isaiah so memorably puts it, to beat swords into ploughshares, spears to pruning hooks, Molotov cocktails into flower bouquets ... that last transformation is perhaps a little bit more of a stretch.

"Our Father in heaven...". Four simple words. And yet profound words that draw us into new communion with God and with one another, opening up a new world of possibility. Thanks be to God. Amen.