

Marking Father's Day

What kind of father do or did you have? How do you rate him as a father? Five out of ten... more or less?

Our unique experience of 'being fathered' is something that may affect us for life. By and large, if our experience of parenting is fairly positive, we usually want to replicate it with our own children and if it's pretty negative, we tend to want to do things differently... I think that makes sense. Clive and I are going to share with you our very different experiences of being fathered.

Clive's experience

My father died nearly 40 years ago but I have some abiding memories of my childhood and growing up as a teenager in the 50's and early 60's. Pretty much all these memories are positive and as time has gone on I see even the previously negative ones as products of the environment and heritage that my father had, and now completely understand why he had the views and reactions that were inevitable.

The core gift I was offered (even if I didn't take it up!) was quiet reliability and steadiness. He, with my mother, was a regular church attender and my sister and I were encouraged/expected to follow suit. It was a very conformist household and as I realised from comparison with friends at school, pretty strict. My father never articulated much about his faith, and would have run a mile from public participation in services, except in the realm of sacred music which he loved. He was in the church choir at Whitton Baptist, was a good bass, and when my voice broke I was delighted to try to be able to 'sing' alongside him! Many times when later I am attempting to sing the bass line in hymns or oratorios (such as Stainer's Crucifixion) the image comes to me of Dad next to me rising on his toes with the pitch of the music! He certainly gave me the love of music and singing in particular.

In my youth I often criticised my Dad for what I perceived as a lack of ambition in his career as he'd stuck to the same job and company for over 50 years. However, later I became ashamed of my attitude when after my mother's death my sister and I discovered three harsh and precipitous redundancy letters given to my Dad in his first year of employment as an apprentice in 1919 when soldiers returning from WW1 were given priority. Then there was the General Strike and the Great Depression, so to keep a job over those decades was indeed an achievement!

He was a loving, encouraging Dad who was always there for my sister and I, quietly and steadily in the background, giving us the example of following Christ in our lives.

Florence's experience

My father was very different! When we were children, he frequently seemed indifferent, sometimes cruel, often angry and usually very keen that we should be working on the farm. My parents' marriage was not happy and I feel we often got caught in the middle of their hostilities. As the years have gone by, my understanding of and sympathy for him has grown. One of my nephews and Clive have helped me to appreciate how hard my father worked to support us and that it was his strength, determination and ambition that kept him going. He was a very sociable man who loved family get togethers. With help, I've been able to forgive and learnt to love him.

What are the characteristics that make a 'good enough' human father? Love, care, compassion... with just the right amount of discipline or correction? Ideally, a father will be wise, patient, fun-loving, kind and gentle, yet strong and protective when necessary. You might put different ingredients into the mixture... and I think most of us would agree that different skills are needed at different stages of development: fathering a pre-school child is very different from fathering a teenager!

God as Father in the New Testament

Jesus was very conscious that God was his Father (John 5:17 "My Father is always at his work...") and he teaches his disciples (and therefore us) to think of God as "Our Father" too (Matthew 6:9).

There are several examples in John's Gospel where Jesus gives us an insight into the kind of relationship he enjoyed with his Father.

John 8:28-29 "I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him."

This intimate relationship is encapsulated in John 10:30 "I and the Father are one" and v.38 "the Father is in me and I in the Father."

Some, if not all, of the original twelve disciples seemed to have difficulty understanding this and in John 14:9-10 Jesus says "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... Don't you believe that I am in the Father and that the Father is in me?" In this inspiring chapter, Jesus also speaks about the Holy Spirit. In John 14:26 "...the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

(The doctrine of the Trinity: although the word 'Trinity' is never mentioned in the Bible, it is one of the pillars of our faith. Christianity is built around the belief that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.)

A few minutes for personal reflection:

What kind of a Father does God seem to be?

What do we learn from Jesus about "our Father" in these verses?

He teaches us; he is always there for and with us; he inspires & encourages obedience; he provides for us.

God as Father in the Old Testament

Although I didn't expect to find many, when I looked up 'Father' in a concordance, the Old Testament also contains several references to God as Father. For example:

Deuteronomy 1:31 "...and in the desert... you saw how the Lord your God carried you as a father carries his son". Also in Deuteronomy 32:6 "Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made and formed you?"

Psalms 68 v.5 "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling."

Isaiah 64 v.8 "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand."

For further study, there are other quotations in 2 Samuel, the Psalms, Isaiah and Jeremiah

The parable in Luke 15:11-32

The parable of the lost (or prodigal) son is an ideal illustration for Father's Day. At one level, it's the story of a selfish young man who asks his father to give him his share of the estate – he doesn't even say please!

Straight away the father does as his younger son requests. We all know what happens next: the young man "squanders his wealth" and sinks deeper and deeper in the mire. Eventually, he realizes that his father's employees are a lot better off than he is. He determines to go back to his father and ask him for a job.

This is where the parable becomes the father's story. We discover his father has been looking out for him, sees him in the distance and, "filled with compassion" runs to meet him. Then he throws his arms around him and kisses him. The young man is re-instated as a son and the celebrations begin.

The other, older, brother comes in from the fields where he's been working and expresses his disgust and anger.

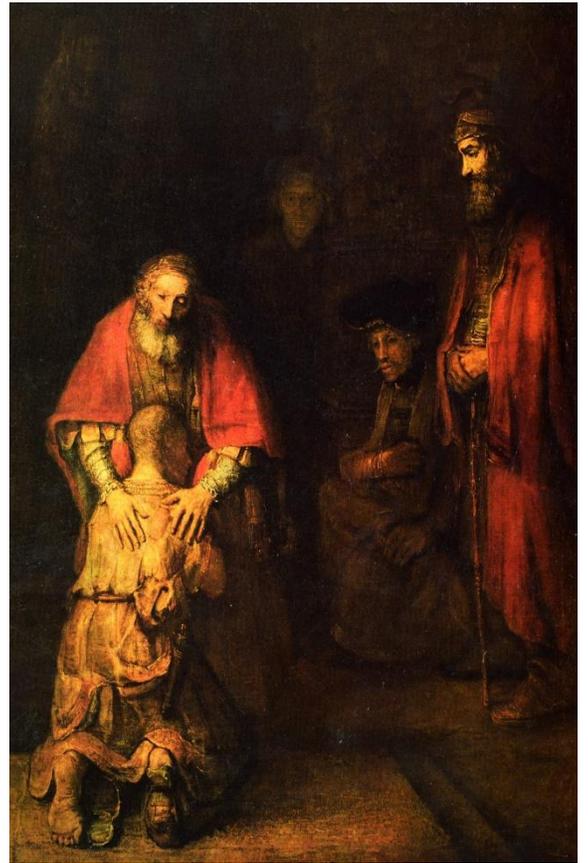
There's an excellent book about this parable by Henri Nouwen entitled 'The Return of the Prodigal Son'. In the section on the father, Nouwen explains that the painting above was one of the last Rembrandt produced, after a lifetime of suffering that ended in a pauper's death. The figure of the Father is generally thought to be an old man (perhaps Rembrandt himself) who doesn't see very well and if you look closely, you'll notice that his hands are different. One looks stronger, perhaps more masculine; the other appears more delicate, perhaps more feminine.

This is a picture of God, the Father who feels such compassion for the child who was lost that he runs to meet him. This is a Father who loves so much he lets his younger son go to explore 'the world', and yet is always there for him, loves him unconditionally and forgives him freely.

I'm so glad Jesus that told this beautiful story – it is a very fitting illustration of the love that a Father can have for his children.

A few moments of reflective silence and then a short prayer.

Dear Father, we ask you to help us to love not just our children, but one another in the same way. Amen.



Rembrandt's Prodigal Son