

“EVERY DAY A FATHER’S DAY”

READING: *Matthew 10:28-33*

Today is "Fathers' Day". This year we missed out on a true celebration for Mothering Sunday because of the lockdown, and here we are unable to celebrate fatherhood because of the same. Whilst there are many happy families where dad is present and lovingly active within the family, today – just like Mothering Sunday – will also be a day which bring mixed emotions. There will be those families where dad is no longer there, either having passed on, or no longer involved in family life. There will be those who have painful memories of a dad who was less than loving and caring. There will be homes where mum fills the role of dad as well, and where dads fill the role of mum. There will be couples who have been unable to play the role of parents through no fault of their own, as well as those who have lovingly opened their homes to children which are not biologically theirs. We live in a world which is full of complications and difficulties when we approach days such as today.

Whatever our experiences surrounding the role of “father” is, every day should be a Father’s Day. Now the grammatically in-tuned among you will be thinking that he has put the apostrophe in the wrong place. The apostrophe after the “s” in “Fathers’ Day” relates to the one celebrated for our human father figures, but I want to dwell on the one where the apostrophe comes before the “s”, as in “Father’s Day” – a day to celebrate the love and care of God as our Heavenly Father, and this is something we should celebrate every day, not just once a year. Today and every day, we rejoice that the Creator and eternal God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, is not some distant remote force somewhere beyond the skies, but is our Heavenly Father, and He loves us much more than any human father, or mother, could.

I recently read an article by a minister who had been invited to preach at a church in Holland, on the Dutch Day of Remembrance, held on the anniversary of Holland’s liberation from the Nazis. His sermon was preceded by several readings by members of the congregation, one unforgettable one by a teenage girl. She had chosen to read a piece written by someone who had found a diary kept by their father during the war. Here it is: “22 February 1943, tonight, eight o’clock - a Jew hunt. Together with G and D, I arrested 24 Jews in Weesperstraat in Amsterdam.

12 March 1943, tonight, Jew hunt; very successful night I have arrested around 100 Jews in three weeks This morning got home at 3.30am.” This is what my father wrote in a small diary during World War 2. I was a baby in 1943. My father was a Nazi and received extra rations, like bread and cheese, for helping the Germans to find Jews who were hiding from them. For every Jew he arrested, he received 7.50 Guilders - three silver coins. People like him were called "Jew catchers". I don't know whether my father knew that every Jew he handed over to the Germans would be gassed. He probably did. I have wondered a thousand times why he did that; betrayed Jews; I know my family was poor and we had no money. So my mother really needed the money he got from the Germans. My mother told me that my father believed in Hitler, because he promised the common people work, money and power. And when you are poor and have no work you believe words like these. After the war, my father was arrested, and put in prison for five years. I was nine when he was released. I have never been able to talk about the war with him.

I am still ashamed of my father, and I had better not tell you my surname. I wish I had a father I could be proud of. I only hope people don't judge me because of what my father did.” She was obviously, and rightfully, ashamed of her father.

On the other hand, there is a children's story about two boys talking at school about the clubs they went to at night. One said he was frightened when he went out, if it was dark; but the other one said he was never afraid to go out at night, no matter how dark it was. The first boy asked why that was; the second said, it was because his father went with him. The presence of his father, gave the boy courage, strength and peace.

For those who have memories that they like to think about, and over these past few weeks I have shared the memories of many who were saying goodbye to their dads. But no matter what kind of human father we have or had, we have a heavenly Father who no-one could better. Some think Christianity is a rather presumptuous religion. 'Fancy calling Almighty God, Father!' 'Fancy calling the creator of the Universe, Father!' And not only 'Father', but 'Abba', 'Daddy'!

Jesus called Him Father when he was dying on the cross; he cried out '**Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do**'. But that was something he could do, because God was his Father, those critics would agree. But then in his "Sermon on the Mount" Jesus said: '**Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and praise your Father who is in heaven**' and goes on to teach his followers how to pray, saying 'Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name'. He didn't teach them 'Father of Jesus, hallowed be Thy name'. Jesus said his followers could also call God Father, as he did, thus making us his spiritual brothers and sisters. We may be God's creation, but we are more than more than that. We are not just subjects of God or servants of God, but children of God. This is not just 'the good news'; it is wonderful news; so wonderful that we must spread it as much as we can.

There are no other religions which would presume to call God, or their supreme deity, Father, but through sacrifice of Jesus at Calvary, we can, like the Prodigal Son could call his forgiving dad, father. *In the book "I dared to call Him Father", Bilquis Sheikh, a Pakistani Muslim woman of noble birth, deserted by her high ranking official husband, turned to the Koran for answers and peace. On reading there about the prophet Jesus, she turned to the Christian Bible to read more and through a series of strange dreams and visions she found herself on a journey where she prayed to God as "Father". Subsequently, finding out through her son that there was a plot to kill her for betraying her faith, they fled to America to live out her new found faith and to get to know her Heavenly Father more.*

Psalm 139 is a great Psalm to remind us of God's love for us, His knowledge of us, and His power for us. Each day we should thank God our heavenly Father that He chose us even before we were conceived, and has known us since our bones were being knitted together in our mothers' wombs. I don't know about you, but this gives me great comfort.

Often Christian people have said that with all that is happening in the world and all that is happening to them personally, how can people live without the personal knowledge of a compassionate, loving Heavenly Father. In this next week, we remember Dorothy's life and memory. It has been an honour to spend time with her, not as much as I would have liked to, as we shared scripture and prayed for what lay ahead. She did question "why?" – let's face it, who wouldn't, going through what she did. But she was at peace in her heart. Although she said to a few people, "Well we all have to go sometime", she also had the assurance that she was returning to the home of her loving, Heavenly Father. "**In my Father's house are many mansions**", Jesus told the disciples and went on to tell them that He would come back and taken them to be where He was – to the home of His and our Heavenly Father. The one who journeys with us, even in the darkest of days. The One who promised His peace in all circumstances. As Jesus, again, told his followers. "**Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, neither let it be afraid.**" (**John 14 verse 27**). He knew what lay ahead for him, and he knew that the same Heavenly Father who would bring him through, would be with the disciples in all that they would face, and that same assurance is ours today. As the Psalmist wrote "I will lie down in peace and sleep, for you alone, O Lord, will keep me safe" (Psalm 4 verse 8) – and so Dorothy took her final sleep with that same confidence.

Whatever our experiences of earthly dads have been, I trust that we will celebrate every day as "Father's Day" – confidence of His love and acceptance; that we are the apple of His eye; that in Jesus's death and resurrection, He has demonstrated that love for us and welcomes us into His family – safe and secure and loved with everlasting love. **Amen**

MATTHEW chapter 10 verses 28 - 33

²⁸ Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. ³⁰ And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

³² 'Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. ³³ But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

PSALM 139 verses 1 – 17, 23 - 24

¹⁻⁶ GOD, investigate my life; get all the facts first-hand. I'm an open book to you; even from a distance, you know what I'm thinking. You know when I leave and when I get back; I'm never out of your sight. You know everything I'm going to say before I start the first sentence. I look behind me and you're there, then up ahead and you're there, too - your reassuring presence, coming and going. This is too much, too wonderful - I can't take it all in!

⁷⁻¹² Is there any place I can go to avoid your Spirit? to be out of your sight? If I climb to the sky, you're there! If I go underground, you're there! If I flew on morning's wings to the far western horizon, you'd find me in a minute - you're already there waiting! Then I said to myself, "Oh, he even sees me in the dark! At night I'm immersed in the light!" It's a fact: darkness isn't dark to you; night and day, darkness and light, they're all the same to you.

¹³⁻¹⁶ Oh yes, you shaped me first inside, then out; you formed me in my mother's womb. I thank you, High God - you're breath-taking! Body and soul, I am marvellously made! I worship in adoration - what a creation! You know me inside and out, you know every bone in my body; you know exactly how I was made, bit by bit, how I was sculpted from nothing into something. Like an open book, you watched me grow from conception to birth; all the stages of my life were spread out before you, the days of my life all prepared before I'd even lived one day.

¹⁷ Your thoughts—how rare, how beautiful! God, I'll never comprehend them! I couldn't even begin to count them - any more than I could count the sand of the sea. Oh, let me rise in the morning and live always with you!

²³⁻²⁴ Investigate my life, O God, find out everything about me; cross-examine and test me, get a clear picture of what I'm about; see for yourself whether I've done anything wrong - then guide me on the road to eternal life.

FATHER ME (O FATHER OF THE FATHERLESS)

By Graham Kendrick [Mission Praise 906]

O father of the fatherless
In whom all families are blessed

I love the way you father me

You gave me life, forgave the past

Now in your arms I'm safe at last

I love the way you father me

Father me, forever you'll father me

And in your embrace I'll be forever secure

I love the way you father me

I love the way you father me

When bruised and broken I draw near

You hold me close and dry my tears

I love the way you father me

At last my fearful heart is still

Surrendered to your perfect will

I love the way you father me

If in my foolishness I stray

Returning empty and ashamed

I love the way you father me

Exchanging for my wretchedness

Your radiant robes of righteousness

I love the way you father me

And when I look into your eyes

From deep within my spirit cries

I love the way you father me

Before such love I stand amazed

And ever will through endless days

I love the way You father me