

Sermon for Mothering Sunday

Readings: Deuteronomy 11: 18-21 and 26-28
Mark 10: 13-16

It often happens that when I visit people and they start talking about their families, they take a deep breath and say, "Well, the truth is.... we don't always get on." Then, when I say, "In my family we get on much better if we don't see a lot of each other," there's a sigh of relief, and they begin to relax. Family relationships are extremely complicated, and whatever age we are, we seem to find ourselves slipping back into childhood pecking orders when we see our brothers and sisters or parents. I'm well aware that Mothering Sunday is a difficult day for many people for all sorts of reasons, but it's also a time to remember and enjoy all that's good about our family relationships.

But what has God got to do with it all? Well, firstly, God says that we can come to him as a parent, a parent who is completely trustworthy and who doesn't make mistakes, unlike us. The Jews in the Old Testament called God "Father" but in a very hands-off, stand-back sort of way. You'll have seen pictures of 19 century men, chin up, square shoulders, big beard, glaring at the camera. Or of formidable Queen Mary in the last century, with her umbrella. However, Jesus says we can call God "Abba": dad, daddy. And in the gospel reading Jesus flings his arms round the children. Parenting is something God is very good at; he invented it for his relationship with us as well as for one of our closest relationships with each other. He invented the family and wants to help us in our families.

So let's come to him and let him fling his arms round us. That's surely what a church service is for: to come to God

and let him put his arms round us; we need that again and again to help us cope. Let's thank him for the many good experiences of parenting most of us have had. And let's let him keep his arms gently round us to make up for the bad experiences some of us have had. In one place in the Bible God says, "I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten" (Joel 2:25). I've seen God do this for some people who have had bad experiences with their parents. Let's also keep his arms round us as we admit the mistakes we've made in parenting, those of us who are parents. God will forgive you even if your children sometimes won't. And let's draw his arms round us as we remember people who have died. (This week was the first anniversary of my mother's death too.) The same God who is our Father in this life is there on the other side of death; for those who have died, He's their Father too. A few years ago I was asked to help at a memorial service one summer at the Crematorium on Bluebell Hill, for the relatives of anyone who had died recently, and I was told, "It never rains." Well, it poured, and people crammed into the two chapels; and those of us involved in the service had to go back and forth between the two chapels, rather ineffectually. God our Father moves back and forth between the two chapels very easily, between this life and the next, so we can speak to him about those people we grieve for today.

So this Mothering Sunday we can come to God as a parent. But the second reason we involve God in Mothering Sunday is that he helps us to show to other people, especially our families, some of what we get from him. As we let him put his arms round us and we experience being loved and forgiven by him, and as we learn to leave in his hands people who have died, so we can show God's love to our children, grandchildren, our families and everybody we come across. And that love is not a lot of slop and gush; that's not the love Jesus showed when he died for us on the cross. It's tough, it's

firm, it's enduring, and it's not afraid to say no when necessary. Parents at present seem to have lost confidence in themselves, and often let children rule them; you may also have seen on TV recently something about children beating up their parents. But knowing God as our Father should give us as parents and grandparents the confidence to show the same sort of love to our children. No one is going to tell children what is right and wrong unless we do; no one is going to introduce them to God unless we do. Let's not be scared of our children and grandchildren, or of the children or teenagers we come across in the street, but show them the authority and love we receive from God.

To end with: picture yourself as a child standing on some steps looking outwards. Behind you is God, like a father or mother, his hands gently reassuring you, loving you, keeping you firm and forgiving you. And knowing him there behind you gives you the confidence not to look backwards at the past and its mistakes, nor to keep your eyes on the ground, nor to avoid the world by looking upwards, but looking out, expectant, hopeful, and able to show the same love to others that you meet.

Chris van Straaten