

King's College London Chapel



A sermon on the theme of God as Father,
by the Revd Tim Ditchfield FKC
in the College Chapel on the Strand,
on Wednesday 12th October 2022

Father – as a word to speak about God is an old metaphor - in the Hebrew scriptures and indeed other religions:

In Mesopotamian mythology, An or Anu is the father deity of the Sumerian pantheon and is also the earliest attested Sky Father deity.

In Hinduism, in the Bhagavad Gita, chapter 9, verse 17: "I am the Father of this world, the Mother, the Dispenser and the Grandfather".

But it is a complex and loaded word to use to speak about God. For some of us father/dad is a good and helpful image: my dad was a good dad - a regular working-class northern bloke who liked a beer and had his teeth taken out for a bet – as you do. (the beer and the teeth incident are related but that is another story for another time!)

But for others the image of a father is not good: a bully; violent; absent, and for many years I have been cautious using the word because of this complex context.

And yet Jesus uses the word to describe God a lot. The Gospel reading we have just heard is a parable to help us understand what God might be like – is one such place. I suspect we all know the story; some of us know it very well, and I'm aware we might miss the key to the story when we call it **the prodigal son** when it should perhaps be called the parable of **the welcoming father**?

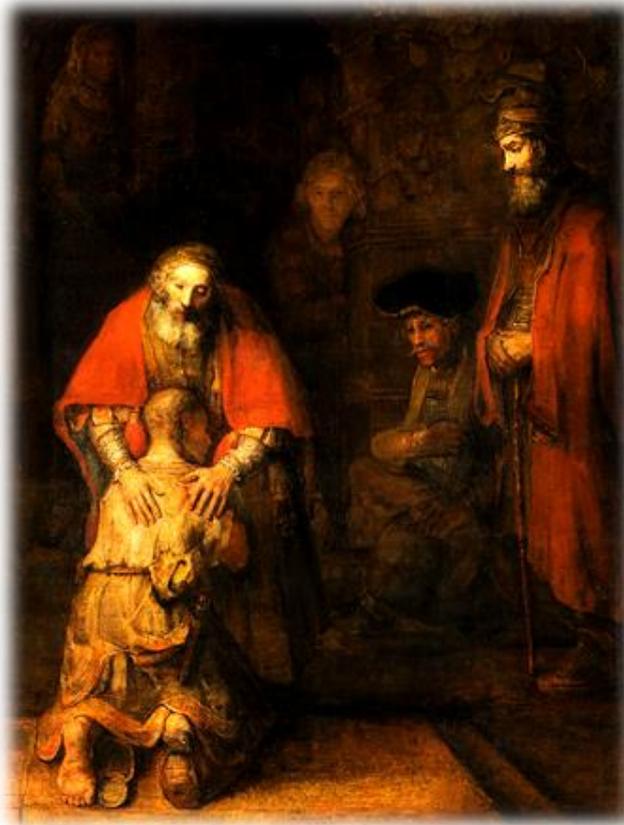
And it is a good place to start when talking about God as a father.

I guess at one point in my life I identified clearly with the prodigal son, but then as I got older in the faith as a Christian and older more generally I find myself tutting along with the elder brother and have to resist that tendency – along with lots of other Christians I suspect. And the key to this parable is the father's actions: the son returning rehearses his speech and isn't allowed to make it by the father who's waiting desperately for the son to return, just like God, waiting and hoping...

And God is only – or mainly – described as a father in this parable to help us to be like him. The intro to the parable says: *Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."* The religious types were tutting and Jesus says don't tut but be like the father not the elder brother who rushes out the moment he sees his son and doesn't give his son time to repent.

Also completely lets go of any sense of dignity. Apparently for a Jewish man to expose his ankles was a very embarrassing thing to do and here the old man hitching skirts up and running out to meet his son.

There is also another image of the father. Look at him. The father in Rembrandt van Rijn's *'The Return of the Prodigal Son'*:



One of my favourite books is Henri Nouwen's *'The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming'*. It is a sort of art masterclass to see the embrace of love from the father who represents God. Nouwen went each day to sit with the painting - apparently sometimes for 8 hours at a sitting when he was writing the book to really see it. And here is Nouwen's beautiful description of the father:

The near-blind father sees far and wide. His seeing is an eternal seeing, a seeing that reaches out to all of humanity. It is a seeing that understands the lostness of women and men of all times and places, that knows with immense compassion the suffering of those who have chosen to leave home, that cried oceans of tears as they got caught in anguish and agony. The heart of the father burns with an immense desire to bring his children home.

And the Elder brother at the side is sneering at the younger son and is comparing himself to the younger son and in the parable has accused the father of preferring the younger son to himself.

But Father doesn't do this; he loves both equally... **Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.** God sees the pain of people and seeing that has a love that always welcomes, always wants to celebrate. Nouwen again:

Here is the God I want to believe in: a Father who, from the beginning of creation, has stretched out his arms in merciful blessing, never forcing himself on anyone, but always waiting; never letting his arms drop down in despair, but always hoping that his children will return so that he can speak words of love to them and let his tired arms rest on their shoulders. His only desire is to bless.

And the lovely phrase in Nouwen's description: *His only desire is to bless* leads me to another image of God implicitly as a father in what is often called the *Aaronic blessing* in Numbers 6: 24-26

God bless you and keep you; God make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; God lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Make his Face shine and be gracious to you. Lift up his countenance and give you peace...

I've looked up this passage in various commentaries to work out the difference between God's face shining on us and God lifting up their countenance (another word for face). I wanted there to be a difference to show some really deep meaning here. But I don't think there is. The blessing simply says may God smile on you, and may God smile on you again. isn't that a wonderful image: God as a father smiling. And to remind someone that God looks on them and smiles is such a beautiful thing which is what we do when we offer a blessing to someone else.

As I draw to a close, can I invite you to do something a bit awkward: just close your eyes and think of someone looking at you and smiling. Someone you know, who loves you because they see you and love you as you are. What a powerful thing that is. Can I invite you if you are happy doing this to spend a few moments thinking of that person who loves you and offer them a simple blessing ask God to bless them quietly in your heart. if you feel comfortable doing that. Or just silently in your heart say. Bless you.... And then maybe extend that blessing to those sat around you by offering a blessing to someone you are offering them that powerful experience of being known and loved by God and by another human.

Let me finish with that bit from Henri Nouwen again:

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Amen.