

So, last week I talked about the Black Lives Matter movement and how unhelpful it is when people's response to it is to say 'All Lives Matter'. It's like every year when International Women's day comes round on, March 8th, and men of a certain kind, so-called men's right activists, take to the internet with the cry 'When's international *men's* day?' Well, it's on the 19th November but then the people who ask that question don't do so because they don't *know*, they're just upset that women are, as they see it, getting special treatment. They don't like the idea that women have it worse than men and that they have male privilege but both of those things seem so obviously true to me, I find it bizarre that anyone could dispute them.

This isn't really the point of my sermon so I won't spend too long on it but a few years ago, something appeared on twitter which illustrated what we mean by male privilege very powerfully. It was based on a piece of research in which both men and women were asked what actions they take on a daily or regular basis to avoid being assaulted. The women had a long list: check the back-seat before getting in a car, hold my keys as a potential weapon, vary my route home from work, don't go jogging at night, don't wear headphones when jogging during the day, make sure I see my drink being poured, never put my drink down and come back to it'. The male response was always a version of 'Nothing. I don't really think about it...'

And that's certainly true for me. I mean obviously if I was walking through a dodgy area late at night, I might; but for women those kind

of safety procedures are just normal. And necessary. They *shouldn't* be but sadly they are and that's why those of us who *don't* have to worry about such things are privileged; just as white people who've never been challenged for walking up the drive to their own house or getting in their own car are privileged. But like I say, that's not what I want to talk about today!

Today is Fathers' Day which we don't normally make a big deal of in the church. You know, *Mothers's* Day is a major festival – or rather, Mothering Sunday, which was originally a celebration of Mother *church* not human mothers, is a big deal – but, over the years, the two have been conflated and so Mothering Sunday is now a day when people make a special effort to come to church and indeed you see a lot more husbands and teenage children who've clearly been told 'You might not come with me the *rest* of the year but you're jolly well coming *today...*'

But *Fathers'* day often passes without even a mention in church and I'm not suggesting that men are therefore hard done by in a 'what about international men's day?' kind of way. It's equally beyond dispute that the average Mum does far more for her family than the average *Dad* does – hence the old joke about how women know all *about* their children, their favourite foods, secret fears, hopes and dreams while men are vaguely aware of some short people living in the house...

So Mothers' day *should* be a bigger deal. Although you *could* say that Mothers' Day is actually an *anti-feminist* ploy: because celebrating women's contribution to society just once a year (in a way that *can* border on the sentimental) is significantly easier and far less challenging for men than actually changing the way that things are *structured*. So paraphrasing the prophet Isaiah, 'Is a single day enough? Isn't it more important to loose the bonds of injustice?'

But again, that's not really what I want to talk about. My point is simply that it's Fathers Day and just as, on some Mothers' Days I've talked about how God is like a mother, today I want to explore the ways in which God is like a *Father*.

Now in the last few weeks, I've stressed a couple of times that God isn't *actually* male so, by the same token, He's not literally Our Father, even though that's how we address 'Him' in the most famous Christian prayer. And the author of the book of Hebrews also calls God the 'Father of our Spirits' but when we use language like 'The source of all being' or think of God as the one who gave birth to everything that is, clearly that's more feminine, maternal imagery.

Similarly, if you wanted to convey *absolutely unconditional* love; a love that doesn't stop or even diminish *whatever* the object of it does – which is how *I* believe God loves us – well, you'd probably think of a *mother's* love, wouldn't you? As in the slightly distasteful phrase 'he had a face that only a *mother* could love'! But I think there *are* ways in which it's helpful to think of God in more paternal terms...

So, I've done a lot of therapy over the years. I first went to see a counsellor when I was just 18 or 19 but when I was even younger than that, I read a book written by John Cleese and his psychiatrist Robyn Skynner called Families and How to survive them. I don't know if any of *you* have read it and I was actually thinking I must *re-*read it myself recently. But that was my first exposure to the concepts of psychotherapy and one of the bits I remember was where they were talking about the difference between the roles of the mother and the father in a typical family.

Now obviously the whole concept of a typical family is problematic in many ways and clearly lesbian and gay couples and of course single parents are perfectly capable of bringing up happy, healthy children. Indeed I'm sure they often do a better job than many so-called traditional families. And I should add that some of my friends who are bringing up children on their own object to the phrase 'single parent' and prefer 'double parent' cos they're doing twice the work.

But biologically, we all have a mother and a father and generally speaking I think it's fair to say that men and women tend to parent in different ways. So, as I said earlier, it's characteristic of mothers to love their offspring *absolutely unconditionally* (I know that's not true in all cases but it often is) because the instinct to nurture is so strong. And left to its own devices, it can be *so* strong that it's harder for the mother to discipline the child when that's necessary or to let go, as the child grows up – am I getting into hot water here? Generalising too

much? If I am blame John Cleese. And his psychiatrist cos they said that it's part of the father's role to encourage the child to become autonomous. To break away from the safety of dependence on the mother and certainly I think we've experienced that in our own family – and still are maybe..?

But I can still remember one of the cartoon illustrations in the Cleese book of the child standing with its mother on one side of a bridge and the father on the other side encouraging it to make the break from the mother and cross the bridge into adulthood and in the subsequent frames he does; and that, Cleese and his psychiatrist said, is what's supposed to happen.

As I say, I'm sure that can and does still happen in non-traditional family set-ups and of course it *doesn't* in many so-called normal families but if you'll accept that as a broadly-true description of the differing roles of mother and father, well, God is clearly our father as well as our mother. Yes, *She* is the one who gave us life in the first place, who is intimately concerned with every aspect of our lives and crucially never stops loving us, never gives up on us no matter what we do but *He's* also standing on the other side of that bridge, calling us into our full potential, warmly encouraging us to step out of our comfort zone, to take a risk and try something new and picking us up when we fall as we inevitably will. But again where the maternal instinct might be to say 'I don't want you to get hurt so let's just keep you safe' the Father, both human and divine, is more likely to say 'It's

OK. You might get a few bruises but you're not gonna die and it's gonna be worth it...'

I dunno. I feel horribly sexist as I say this and I worry that I might have offended people and if I have I apologise but I do love that image of the smiling encouraging father calling you across the bridge. And that's what I'd like you all to imagine as we move into a time of prayer now...

So if you're happy to go along with a visualisation, you might want to shut your eyes and if you don't want to that's absolutely fine. Maybe it's difficult or painful for you to picture a father so feel free to imagine whatever or whoever you want as long as it's a kind, loving person who has *your* best interests at heart. Who wants nothing but the best for you but who's *also* gently challenging you, calling you to be your best self, to stretch yourself. What is God calling you to do? To let go of? To explore? Let's just spend a few moments in silence and see what happens...