

Sermon for The Second Sunday after Trinity (Father's Day)

It's Fathers' Day. So three cheers today, and as many treats and hugs as the lockdown allows, for everyone who has shown a fatherly care for us, and reflected the love of our Father in heaven. Dads yes, hooray for them (I speak with self-interest!), but also uncles, mothers, vicars, carers, siblings, teachers, neighbours. None of them will have been perfect of course, certainly not me – fathering is not easy whether like me you were brought up rather traditionally and feel the pressure of being the Great Breadwinner and all the rest, or whether like our sons you are trying to navigate good but new and sometimes difficult ways of blending our family roles. And some father-figures will have turned from Christ's way of love and hurt us instead. But many will have blessed us and so today we can in Christ's name say an Alleluia and a Thankyou for that.

So far so good – but where's all that in the bible readings and prayers set for today? Nowhere of course. As far as the church is concerned, it's the Second Sunday after Trinity, and Father's Day just doesn't feature. So what we have in the readings rather jars with our theme.

Hagar and her son Ishmael are driven out in the wilderness by father Abraham, because Hagar and his wife Sarah weren't getting on. Too bad for the slave, whom Sarah herself had set up to sleep with Abraham and bear him a child, because she herself was then barren. What an example of family life! And then, goodness me, we hear Jesus himself saying that he has come, "to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household." What he's getting of course is that our life in the love of God is what matters in the end and what won't let us down, but what a strange an uncomfortable way to put it.

These "texts of terror" as one bible scholar might put it do, though, give us a starting point for what I think are two valuable and useful insights. The first arises from the fact that they are utterly realistic about what family life and fatherhood are actually like. in Have you been watching *A House Through Time* on the television? David Olusoga reveals how behind the fine façade of the home, family life and fatherhood across the centuries was far from perfect. Then the school-teacher's film we saw last week reminded us that, amongst other factors, irresponsible fathering could leave young people at a disadvantage; while a news story later that day told how a policeman had realised that his own poor fathering had set him up to condone racist actions which compounded that disadvantage.

All that may sound like bad news, but just think how worse the fake good news is, that is all around us these days, like the shiny advertising for a product you bought on the internet that was rubbish when it arrived, or the feel-good claim of a politician that hard facts disproved just a day or two later. We need to live in and with the truth, even if we find it hard to bear.

If we face up to the failures of our human fathering, we are in a position to do something about them. We can see – and we can change. Like the elderly woman Kina spoke of last week who changed her mind and saw that all people were equal. Like the livery company in Bristol who were brave enough to say that it was timely that the statue they had cherished was now taken down. Like dinosaur dads like me who are learning to cook and clean and not be taken over by work. And realising that we don't have to sit on our resources like a dragon on his treasure but can often use them to help make a difference for good, through church, through charities, through what and how we buy. All of us can do better even if perfection is out of our reach.

But we can also remember something else Kina was telling us last week and this is the second big insight from our readings, that we have our ultimate identity and safety in the love of God, a love that is there for each of us and will always be there for us, simply because we are his creation, his children. So that even when we do fail or are failed, that is not the end of the story. "Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life," St Paul tells the Christians in Rome. They and we are no longer enslaved, either to our own sin or the sin of others. Neither of those define us anymore. We are free. The chains cannot hold us. God in his love can open our eyes to wells of water and provide for us, just as he did for Hagar in the desert; and when no wells can be opened in this world because human sin has poisoned them, despite all our endeavours, then in Christ we have a well of living water that springs with eternal life. It is still Eastertime and always will be, for those who live in the love of God. Alleluia!

+ David