

**Sermon for Fathers’ Day 21st June 2020**

Friday night saw Liz and I watching ‘Jack Whitehall’s Fathers’ Day’. For those unacquainted with this father and son duo’, comedian Jack teams up with his theatrical agent Dad, Michael Whitehead, for half an hour of amusing banter that plays to the strengths and prejudices of both. This Fathers’ Day edition featured Jack providing a series of Fathers’ Day surprises to his Dad which included a brass band playing outside his window at 6am, arms-length tea in the garden of Dad’s gorgeous riverside house in Putney and a Master chef competition. At times hilarious, at other times deeply cynical, it was also full of affection, and towards the end even deeply moving and poignant.

I’ve no idea what their true relationship is like, but by humorously recognising the differences between the generations whilst retaining a deep sense of affection, the pair of them presented to me a worthy aspiration for any father-son relationship.

When Fathers’ Day comes around our performance as fathers or our experience of fatherhood often comes under the spotlight. We reflect with pride, disappointment, pain and a multitude of other emotions. What kind of a role model have we provided or experienced and what has the impact of that been down the years?

The Bible is an uneasy place to which to turn for wisdom on fatherhood. Some of those most revered are hardly good father role models by the standards to which we aspire.

Abraham – the father of the faith – was unfaithful. Jacob’s fatherly favouritism caused no end of problems for his sons, not least for Joseph. David, that man so close to God, fails to punish his son for abusing his daughter.

But then we come across Joseph who adopts a different approach entirely breaking with patriarchal convention. Instead of abandoning Mary to avoid shame and humiliation, he stands by her. He raises Jesus as his own son.

Many understandably struggle to address God as ‘Abba’, ‘Father’, because of their experiences of fatherhood.

Joseph, though, made this possible for Jesus. Jesus’ own experience of fatherhood gives him the confidence to address God in the most personal of terms, and goes on to describe God as one who is all-loving, one who will run out to embrace us and lead us home.

One of the paradoxes of life is that we accumulate a huge amount of experience down the years and yet the moment to make use of it has invariably already passed. Grandparents naturally like to pass on this wisdom of course but it isn’t always welcome. We have to learn for ourselves, make our own mistakes.

It’s equally true that there are few opportunities to lay down the baggage of past experiences of fatherhood. Fathers’ Day is an opportunity to celebrate what has gone well and been appreciated, but it’s not an easy time if there are mistakes to be acknowledged. I have yet to come across a Fathers’ Day card that invites the recipient to own up to the errors of their attempts at fatherhood. As on some other celebratory days in the calendar, today is often a day for glossing over the unpleasant bits that lurk close or deep in our memories.

Yet we can do this in worship. We can – in the privacy and intimacy of our relationship with God – bring the uncomfortable and disturbing into the light of Christ and ask for forgiveness and healing. By acknowledging before God the shortcomings in our own experience we can slowly discover that we are no longer tethered or defined by them.

This is my invitation to you this morning. As I play ‘Come bring your Burdens to God’ take the opportunity to open your heart and allow the music to draw from you that which you truly want to acknowledge this Fathers’ Day – whether it be thoughts of thankfulness or sorrow. And hand it all over to God.

[music]

After our next song we’re going to experiment with the break out room facility on zoom and everyone will be divided into small groups for 5 minutes chat.

What I would like us to think about is the language we use when we talk about God. What works for you? Remember that in Hebrew God simply means ‘I am’. There is no gender. Yet we often find that gender descriptions of God are used – sometimes helpfully, sometimes not. What language works for you and why?

But first we sing again…

Amen.