

# Abba; Father

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*A sermon given on the Seventh Sunday of Trinity 23rd July 2023 – by Rt Revd Bishop David James, in Beverley Minster*

*Romans 8:12-25*

There are just a very few words that have travelled from the Aramaic that Jesus spoke through the Greek of the New Testament, to the English the Bibles we use today. One of these words is 'Amen' - 'Let it be'. Another is 'Hallelujah' - 'Praise the Lord.' But perhaps the most surprising and most amazing word that's travelled through time and across culture and language is 'Abba' - 'Dada.' The first word a Jewish baby would utter - at least, that's what the mother would tell the father. A word implying love, dependence and trust, perhaps even hero worship, though that soon disappears. It was the word Jesus used when speaking of the Creator of the universe 'Abba', 'Dada' - 'Daddy'. It's such an important word for our Christian faith that, as I said, has transcended time and culture and language. In Jewish thought, God was the father of the nation and therefore, yes, the father of the King, as representative of the nation. But that was a formal relationship. Jesus was the first person in history to take seriously the idea that God could be approached directly and simply and intimately as 'Abba' - 'Dada.' And so when the disciples of Jesus asked him how to pray, he told them to keep it simple. 'Don't heap empty phrases' he said, 'Pray in this way' he said, 'Abba in heaven.' He invited them, and he invites us to share his relationship with God as our 'Abba' - 'Dada' - 'Father'.

St Paul in our first reading says, *"You have received the Spirit of adoption. When we cry, Abba, Father, it is the Holy Spirit bearing witness with our Spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ."* In the Roman world within which Paul was writing, sons were owned by their fathers as if they were property right until the day their father died. They could be sold or given away. And if this happened, it took place through a very public ceremony before a magistrate and in the presence of seven witnesses. When a person then became a son or daughter to someone else, they became that person's child as someone born into that new family. And that old life was dead and gone. Any debts were cancelled from that previous life. Any crimes committed in that previous life were forgotten, gone. That person had died and come alive as a new child in a new family. The most famous example at that time was of the Emperor Claudius adopting Nero as his son - that wasn't a good choice.

In the same way, says St Paul, we have been purchased by God to be his sons and daughters. We were children of this world, now we're children of the King of kings; we

were slaves to the physical world without God - death and decay were the order of our existence - but now we are sons and daughters of the living God. And we are treated in the same way as God's only begotten son, Jesus Christ. We have the same privileges as he had: access to the Father at all times through prayer; resurrection from the dead; eternal life; and a seat at the high table in the heavenly banquet. But Paul says there is a sting in the tail: we also suffer with Christ.

But what sort of Father is our Abba in heaven? Our Archbishop recently hit the national headlines for a half-aside in a speech he made, expressing sympathy for those who have difficulty thinking of God as Father because of their adverse experience as children - because that can create an unhelpful image that undermines or inhibits their faith. This of course isn't a new problem. It's been around since the time of Jesus and before.

For our picture of God as Father, we have to look to the Bible, not to our own experience, for good or ill. So God spoke through the prophet Hosea around 800 BC. *"It was I who taught Ephraim to walk. I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with chords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them."* Psalm 103, used in our funeral service, *"As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him."* We need to look to the life of Jesus and his relationship with God and to his teaching. He said, *"There was a man who had two sons"* - yes, you know the story, we call it the parable of the Prodigal Son. But really it's the parable of the Prodigal Father who is over-the-top generous in his love and his forgiveness and his patience towards his two wayward sons: the one who went off the rails and the stay at home goody, goody. You may have seen the Rembrandt painting called The Return of the Prodigal Son. I had a copy of it in my chapel in Bradford. I was having a meeting there with some church wardens, and afterwards one of them stayed behind, looking at the picture on the wall. "What is it about?" she asked - and tears were already flowing down her cheeks. I explained - it was of the prodigal son, the old man giving his blessing to the younger one kneeling before him, and the people hinted at in the shadows. "We lost our son" she said, "but we got him back." -"God's like that" says Jesus, "God's like that father."

Some years ago now, I came across a book by a Scottish Presbyterian minister called Cameron Peddy - with a name like that, he had to be Scottish, didn't he? The book was titled 'The Forgotten Talent' and it describes how he discovered a healing ministry. He had been praying about this, and then one lunchtime he was washing the pots, his forearms covered in soap suds, and he was overwhelmed as from nowhere as from nowhere, by a sense of God being with him, of God being in him. And he found himself saying as he

stood there, "Father, oh Father. Father, oh Father" over and over again. And it was the anointing for him, for a ministry of healing, rather reminiscent of Jesus's anointing with the Spirit at the start of his ministry.

Paul wrote in our first lesson, *"When we cry Abba, Father, it is that the very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God."* You remember a few moments ago I mentioned that Roman adoption ceremonies were observed by seven witnesses? Here Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit of God is witness to our adoption into the family of God. What I'm suggesting is that if you want assurance that you are indeed a beloved child of God, it's not that you should get rid of the dishwasher and immerse your hands in washing up liquid. No. It's that you should pray to him, that you should pray to God, trusting that he is your Abba in heaven, and that however prodigal son or daughter you might have been, He loves you and He wants to embrace you in His love.

Joanna, my oldest daughter, was six at this particular time and I wanted to use her as a sermon illustration of faith. I hadn't primed her. She didn't know what I was going to do. I got her to stand on the altar next to me and I held up my arms before her and I said, "Jump." And she jumped into my arms and I caught her.

"How did you know I would catch you?" I asked.

What did she say? "Because you're my daddy. Because you're my daddy."

## Reading Text

### Romans 8:12-25

<sup>12</sup> So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh- <sup>13</sup> for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. <sup>14</sup> For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. <sup>15</sup> For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' <sup>16</sup> it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ-if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. <sup>18</sup> I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; <sup>20</sup> for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; <sup>23</sup> and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.