

The Spirit of Adoption ...

... whereby we cry, "Abba, Father!"

A talk given in the Thursday BCP Communion Service on the 25th July 2024, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Romans 8:12-17

In the late 19th, early 20th century, liberal theology had a reputation for proclaiming a simple message of 'The Fatherhood of God; the Brotherhood of Man.' In one sense, one can't fault that: it clearly chimes with biblical teaching, the idea of God as our heavenly Father and human beings as the children of God. The trouble is when you formulate it as the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, it's just a bit bland, isn't it? It lacks any kind of bite. It's interesting to just ponder why that is so and I think the clue is in our Epistle reading this morning, where yes it is true that human beings are all children of God, but what the epistle introduces is the concept of adoption: this sense that an adopted child is not a natural child, but that there has been some an intervention to bring the child into the family and into relationship with the adoptive parent. And I think that rather changes the way we think about the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, (or the Brotherhood and Sisterhood of Men and Women): that it's no longer something we just take for granted and feel entitled to; it's no longer something that's just a given that doesn't really change anything; but rather, there is a transformation at the heart of it that those who are not in any sort of divine family, those who are not in any relationship with God as Father - suddenly find themselves at the heart his household and enjoying all the privileges of his family.

Paul in his letter to the Romans talks about the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of adoption whereby we cry "Abba, Father!" This word Abba, expresses a degree of intimacy with God; Jesus prayed to God as Abba and his contemporaries were struck by the intimacy of that. The Spirit of God makes it possible for us to share in that sense of intimacy and a belonging to God. One of the things about adoption and being adopted is that suddenly a child with a very uncertain future, by adoption is given a future - is given a completely new network of relationships. Suddenly, all sorts of privileges unfold by virtue of the adoption.

In the Epistle, Paul talks about, '*If we're children, then heirs; heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ*'. So as adopted children, we can anticipate an inheritance; a sense of always being part of the household of God; of having a place in heaven enjoying the riches of God's grace. But there is also a little sting in the tail - '*If so be that we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together*.' So if you're adopted into God's family, then you're expected to embrace the family likeness - and the family likeness is revealed by Jesus and the pattern of his self-giving love, his sacrifice on the cross, and his ultimate resurrection and glorification.

So this concept of adoption is quite a rich one: it carries with it this sense of being brought into a relationship that wasn't there before; it carries with it this sense of a future unfolding that wasn't there before; it carries with it this sense of being brought into relationship with a whole family that wasn't there before. It also carries with it this sense of taking on some of the responsibilities of being part of that family and of, if you like, following our 'elder brother' - the Lord Jesus Christ, seeking to walk in the way that he has walked before us.

And so as we gather at the Lord's table this morning, we give thanks for that adoption; for the Holy Spirit who draws us into that relationship; who puts away the previous way of life that was godless and alone and without that network of relationships. And we rejoice to receive the richness of that family inheritance whereby we call God Father, not as some distant abstract idea but as something real and personal and intimate, life-changing, shaping our futures.

As we receive the bread and the wine, so let us pray also for a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit; the Spirit of adoption; the Spirit whereby we cry, "Abba Father!"; the Spirit who reassures us that we truly are sons and daughters of the living God.

Reading Text

Romans 8:12-17

¹² Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. ¹³ For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. ¹⁴ For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. ¹⁵ For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. ¹⁶ The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: ¹⁷ And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.