

Our Father in Heaven

An Address by Noel C Schultz BA, MA, DMin
Highfield Road Uniting Church, Canterbury, 18th June 2006.

How do you think Jesus would have responded if he walked into one of your groups here at Highfield Road congregation and you asked him, “Lord, teach us to pray”? Would he have responded, “When you pray, say, ‘Our Father in heaven’”? Perhaps he would.

Maybe he would have opted for some other term of address, perhaps – ‘Understanding Mother of our all’, or ‘Living God’, or ‘the eternal One’, or ‘the Ground of our being’. Whatever the title or name, there would probably be debate at the next presbytery meeting, maybe Synod and even Assembly, over the appropriateness of the term of address he used. For sure, there would be some who would not want him to address God as ‘Our Father’.

Long before feminist theologians raised serious objections to ‘father’ as a suitable title for God, some people considered it an ‘off-putting’ and even an offensive term for God. Fathers and grandfathers too, are sometimes poor listeners; they can be autocratic and authoritarian, but much worse, they can be cruel, callous, even sadistic. Children with the grave misfortune of having a father, stepfather, or grandfather who wantonly neglected, terrified or abused them, will not be drawn to God by the use of the image of ‘father’ - at least not without considerable effort. Clearly, for some the concept of ‘father’ represents much that is unpleasant, unattractive, even repugnant.

Undoubtedly for Jesus it had totally different associations, otherwise he would not have used the term. I don’t know what sort of relationship Jesus had with Joseph in the carpenter’s shop and at home in Nazareth, but the term ‘father’ suggests a good deal of trust and confidence in the relationship. When he prayed aloud he most frequently used the expression ‘Father’, or the more intimate term, ‘Abba’. We may rightly suppose that he regarded the eternal God with tremendous trust. It expressed his belief that God possessed divine tenderness as well as protective strength, that God was available to him and responsive to his needs, and that God was reliable and worthy of the trust he placed in him.

The Reformer, Martin Luther, made the point that in using the term ‘Father’, Jesus was encouraging us to approach God with ‘boldness and confidence’. Children who know that they are loved and understood by their fathers have no hesitation in speaking to their fathers about the things that are important in their lives. So the term is intended to express the free-flowing, spontaneous drawing near to someone we can be sure is available and dependable.

Obviously, any term or title we give to God has its limitations. It can reveal and it can also conceal. Every term can distract us away from, as well as point us to the reality we call God. Certainly our experiences in life will colour every term we use. To speak of God using human terms, as though God were a human being, is always a risk.

We can be too literal in our application of any title we give to God. The title or name is a picture, a symbol, an image, that has a comparison point. To speak of God as a rock, a fortress, a stronghold, a refuge, a storm, as the psalmist often does, conveys a picture of the strength and the security God provides. In the case of 'father', as I said a few moments ago, the image conveyed is one of approachableness, dependability and understanding. I do feel for those whose experiences discourage them from thinking this way, and who reject not just the name 'Father', but the God symbolised by this term.

Thus in Alice Walker's book, *Colour Purple*, Shug Avery did not want to have anything to do with God, because she had been led to believe that God was made in the image of white middleclass males. "When I found out that God was white and a male, I lost interest". But Shug was able to look beyond the image to the reality. Her own success in discovering God beyond the negative image enabled her to persuade Celie, who had given up on God, that God is better grasped as joyful and undeserved surprise (the Colour Purple), rather than predictable abuse.

Quite clearly, no one image or title is adequate or rich enough to evoke the multiple presence and the many-sided activity of God. Images drawn from human life, like father, mother, friend and so forth, helpful as they are because they are accessible to us, are still not completely adequate. Using personal images for God like father, mother, parent, may tempt us to think of the almighty as though the eternal one was made in the image of human beings.

I referred earlier to some of the psalmist's terms for God like rock and fortress. Another powerful image from Psalm 24 is to speak of God as great warrior. 'Who is the king of glory?' and the answer given is 'The lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle'. This image has a strong connection with the creation stories, the exodus theme, the settlement in the promised land, the exile and the return after the Babylonian captivity. Again, some find the term offensive, but it is an important element in liberation theology and in our pursuit of justice, and in maintaining hope under oppressive conditions.

It is, I believe, totally appropriate that we should have considerable difficulty in speaking of God, or in giving God names, or titles, to describe God and God's activity. To name someone presupposes power or authority over the subject named. We do not have power to control God, we cannot reduce God to our image. God for us is thus the Unnameable One.

The story of the fiery bush is a reminder that God dare not be reduced to such familiar levels, for as Moses was told, God is the Unnameable One, the Uncontrollable One, who is to be regarded with awe and praise. Martin Buber (of *I and Thou* fame) has claimed that that the voice of God that Moses heard, traditionally translated as 'I am who I am' might be better translated to highlight the radical involvement of God in the universe as 'I shall be present' or 'I shall be there'. If God were not able to be present in all places and active in all events, Moses would have faced an impossible task in leading Jewish slaves to the land of promise.

Now it is this great God, the rock, the fortress, the king of glory, the great JHVH, the one who said to Moses 'I shall be there for you', whom Jesus frequently addressed as 'Father'; this is the one whom we are encouraged to come to confidently and to address in solidarity with God's people everywhere as 'Our Father in heaven'.

Now when I say 'Our Father in heaven' I do not for one moment picture God as a male, sitting somewhere on a dazzling throne beyond the atmosphere, as some critics of the church foolishly claim we think. I am however, aware of God's unceasing activity in the universe of which we are but a very small part. There is no place where God is not present and there is no event in which God is not active in some way. I like this description found in an American journal "In some situations God is active in creating, providing, sustaining and preserving life and enabling us to grow. In some, God is active in governing, ordering life by making demands upon us and by setting limits. In others, God is active in judging, bearing down upon us with the consequential force of our sinful acts. In others, God is active in liberating, unexpectedly and swiftly reversing evil conditions. In still others, God is active in redeeming, comforting, instilling hope and a sense of possibility, surprising us with joy" (Mary Engel: "Tambourines to the Gory of God", *Word and World*, 1987, p. 158).

To sum up, when I say the words 'Our Father in heaven' it is with confidence, with trust, with dependence and a sense of awe that the great God everywhere active down through the aeons of time is accessible also to me and responsive to my needs. I hope you have a similar awareness when you pray these words.