

*Sermon given by the Revd Robert Gilbert, on Mothering Sunday, Magdalen 2016. 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32*

Today is of course Mothering Sunday, or Mother's Day. Earlier this morning I preached a sermon about how motherhood is something we can share, or something we can adopt; about how some fathers have to be both mum and dad at the same time to their children; about how motherhood is an act of great generosity and great responsibility and, ultimately, an act of great hope – because no mother ever knows how her children will turn out, though she hopes the very best for them. What I wanted to say, was that being something like a mother, taking a mothering attitude, is something we can all rather obviously do, and something we can receive from different people as well as from the people who are actually the mothers we love.

Our readings at Magdalen this morning seem to be more about fathers than mothers. But we should remember how fatherhood too is not just a natural role to play, but also a position to take, and something to be shared, and a responsibility – and an act of hope. And let's do that reminding ourselves that one of the images of God the Father we receive in the Old Testament is that of a mother hen caring for her chicks.

In our reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we have this wonderful assertion, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view". I wonder, do parents *ever* regard their children from a merely "human" point of view? Of course, there's nothing *wrong* with a human point of view but don't we want to say more of our children, and of our nephews, or nieces, or grand-children, or god-children? Actually, don't we want to say more of our parents too? Don't any of us with responsibilities for young people, or who remember how we have been cared for ourselves, want to say more than what a *dispassionately human* point of view might allow us to? We want to say something like this to our young people: you are unique, and you are valued just for who you are. And we want to remember how others, including our own parents, have said the same thing to us: you are unique and you are valued just for who you are. Well, in our reading from Paul's letter this morning we are reminded that God says to us: you are unique, and you are valued just for who you are.

Then in our Gospel we are reminded of one of the great stories of our lives, a story about love and generosity and forgiveness and kindness, the story of the prodigal son, or of the two sons, or of the loving father – you can frame the story in various ways. And this story reminds us at the same time of what mothers and fathers do for, and say about their children; and of how God relates to us.

"There was a man who had two sons." And this opening reminds us of the simple fact that each child a parent has is unique and couldn't be confused with another. The children which parents have can be – are – different from one another, but difference does not mean that they are worse or better, and that becomes clear in the next aspect of the story.

Because when the younger son asks for his share of the estate, his father gives him what he asks for. Parents want to respond to their children with generosity, and give them what they want or need. Maybe we would want to say this father was foolish – for just caving in and giving his younger son what he asks for. But many parents would do the same, and this story reminds us that there is no shame in that, it's a perfectly reasonable thing to do.

But then when he returns from his time wasting his inheritance the younger son knows that however bad the things he has done he can still return to his father and be welcomed; and his father confirms that gut instinct by coming out to meet him, anxious just to be reconciled to his son and to have him in his arms. The love and compassion of the father in our story are just as you'd expect.

Something that the father also recognises in his son is that the lad has made a choice – he has returned home. And just that choice is enough to reassure him that the right next step is to embrace him and celebrate his return. Like any parent, the father in our story rejoices that his son has made one good choice, however many wrong turns there had been before.

And then we encounter the older son, and the older son is angry and confused. But again the father's response reminds us of some of the fundamental characteristics of parenthood. Parents, for example, want their children to understand – this father wants his older son to understand *why* it makes sense to celebrate the return of his brother. Also, like any parent the father of these two young men recognises what his children really want – he accepted his younger son's desire to test his limits and explore the world; he recognises the older son's basic desire to be at home and support the life of their farm and the local community. But anyway, the father rejoices – as parents most fundamentally do – in being close to his children, *both* his children, and in knowing they are safe.

Jesus didn't just tell this story to remind us of the good things about family life. We said that the story reminds us that the children of a parent can all be different from one another yet be no less valued and loved. *We* are all God's children and no matter how different we are from one another we are no less loved by him.

We said that the story reminds us that parents want to give their children what they want. *We* are all God's children and God wants us to have what we most profoundly, most deeply desire. I guess I would want to say that what every person wants, most deeply, is truth, goodness and in a profound sense to be beautiful and to understand beauty. God wants us to have what we most profoundly, most deeply desire.

The father in our story is reliable, consistent and supportive – and this reminds us of *God's* reliability, consistency and support. The father in our story reveals himself to his sons, makes himself vulnerable in front of them – including his need for both of them and his love for them individually – and God reveals himself to us, Christians believe most clearly in the life of Jesus.

Then, God rejoices in every good choice we make. Think of the joy shown by the father in our story when his younger son remembers himself and returns – the younger son makes one good choice and his father rejoices. We sometimes think too much of how we might be in the wrong for each sin we commit – we should turn it around, and remember how God – like the father in our story – rejoices over every single good thing we do. Forget about sin, it doesn't matter in the end: rejoice instead in the good you can do!

But still we can be confused, like the older brother – he doesn't understand the way the younger son is being treated. In our story the father comes out to plead with the older brother – and similarly God wants us to understand, God wants us to see how we each in our own way are loved as deeply by him as anyone else. God wants us to understand our own lives and to make sense of them for ourselves.

And God wants to give us what we most earnestly desire. “Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.””. God rejoices *whenever* we are close to him. And again, I'd invite you to turn this thinking around: we can rejoice that we are made in the image of God, whatever that means in terms of our ability to understand truth and beauty and goodness, or to think, or have consciousness. But following our reading of the story of the father and his two sons think not of how wonderful it is that we are made in the image of God, but of how God must himself rejoice that we are made in his image, that we are close in nature to him. By which I mean that, as far as the natural order of things goes, we are closest to him. It's a different way of seeing the idea that we are made in God's image from the view we usually take, maybe, but the story of the prodigal son does argue that God rejoices that we are made in his image, just as we give thanks to him, like the younger son, for his generosity to us. Amen.