

Good morning St George's. This series *God's Story, Our Story* is about different people sharing where their lives connect with Scripture. Being Father's Day, and given I alluded to an aspect of my formative experience and its effects on my understanding and relationship with God, and also I had been asked to share my story with the youth, I thought I would take this opportunity to weave a part of my story and my journey of coming to understand God as my Father.

A few caveats need to be mentioned about language before I get into it, however. As you will hear, the metaphor of God as a Father was a difficult one for me, but through wrestling with it, I reached a place of deep understanding of it. So I can be protective of Father-God language because it was hard won for me. But I understand that for some, it is simply too painful or difficult a metaphor, to the point of being unhelpful language. Likewise, perhaps the formative relationship that might have been more instrumental in shaping or misshaping your understanding of God was a mother, or some other parental figure, that may be your story. The last caveat is that we are dealing with metaphorical language. God is not exactly a father, or a mother, because God does not have gender. But it is a metaphor that Jesus used, and it is a metaphor that has been central to my story, and it's Father's Day.

One of my favourite books when I was a small child was "Are You My Mother?" The story of a young bird fallen from a nest and asking various animals if they were its mother. This was a favourite because I grew up without my father, and apparently I had even asked myself various men at the playground if they were my father. Not only was my father absent; but as I grew up, I learnt more about the way he had treated my mother and older brother and sister. The physical and psychological abuse they suffered. The state of fear my mother lived in, not thinking she was able to escape. (How she did get out, motivated by discovering she was pregnant with me is a miraculous story itself.)

I was angry at my father, and any talk of God as a loving Father was confusing to me. As I grew up, my Dad who lives in Australia; would call twice a year, sometime around my birthday, and sometime around Christmas. The conversations were difficult and would always end awkwardly, we would say to one another, "I love you" because that is what a father and son say to each other right? I had this understanding of love that said, "of course my father loves me, he has to, he is my

father and that is what father's do." However this love had very little relational connection behind it. This was how I understood God's love, of course God loves me, that's what God does right? It's in the job description.

When I was about 15, I learnt from my mother, that the circumstances of my conception were not pleasant - her words. More anger. But I remember finding solace in the first scripture reading we have heard today.

For you formed my inward parts;

you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works;

my soul knows it very well.

My frame was not hidden from you,

when I was being made in secret,

intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw my unformed substance;

in your book were written, every one of them,

the days that were formed for me,

when as yet there was none of them.

I clung to these verses and identified with them. What happened to my mother when I was conceived is not what God intended for her. It was not what God intended for me. And it certainly was not what God intended for my father. But, I believe, despite all this, God was at work even then as a master craftsman, weaving a story of hope, of grace, of redemption.

Around the same age as this discovery, I attended this Easter Camp (Hato Paora College, Fielding) where the speaker talked about the "Father's heart of God." (It seemed to be a frequent theme of sermons of that era). This was the sermon that broke the camel's back, one Father heart of God talks too many. I got angry. As frustration and anger flared up inside of me, I knew that I had to respond to this. As I knelt at the foot of this cross, my brother who was there came up behind me and put his hand on my left shoulder. Then I felt another hand on my right shoulder, but when I turned around, no one was there. The only way I can describe what I

experienced next was the feeling of warmth and light flooding over me; then I clearly heard words, and this is the only experience that was so clear like this; God said: “Jeremy, you are my son, I love you, and I am proud of you.” It was the “I’m proud of you” part that wrecked me, because I felt like I got the love thing (it’s in the job description remember); but this made it real. This experience changed my life. These were words I had never heard from my father, and never believed God might feel that way. It wasn’t a pride in anything I had done, but who I was, who God had made me to be. For the first time, I really understood the love of God as a good parent, a good, good father.

God was transforming and using my story to bring me (and I hope others) to a greater understanding of God’s love. I received what Paul spoke of in Romans 8 *For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very 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.*

The word captured in the phrase ‘adoption to sonship’ refers to a legal adoption process in the Greco-Roman world which confers the full rights and privileges as if they were a natural child. We are co-heirs with Christ. It is also interesting that Paul uses the Aramaic word Abba here, rather than just the Greek word for father, πατήρ. Why is this? Abba, being Aramaic, is the word Jesus used for God as father. We are being drawn in by the Spirit, to Jesus’ own intimate relationship with God. Even though we may, like the prodigal son, squandered any sense of inheritance in our own right, Jesus is the true and better Older Brother, who says, “Father, all that is yours is mine, yet even now I give it back to you, for your child was dead, and is now alive, they were lost and now they are found. Let us celebrate and be glad, I desire nothing more to share my inheritance with them.”

Despite this revelation, this clear voice declaring, “I am proud of you.” I remember struggling through the rest of my teenage years that God was disappointed in me. It was a long period of wrestling, crying, shouting, and doubting my way into that relationship. Which brings me to my final revelation of God’s Fatherly love I want to share this morning.

When I was about 18/19 I got involved in the house of prayer movement. When you're in the place of prayer for extended periods of time, you can only distract yourself for so long from being confronted with what you think what God really feels about you. The revelation, found in the prayer room was this: In the same way that we can only love because God first loved us, so to we can only enjoy God if we know that God enjoys us.

It was a revelation, that God wants to spend time with me. Delights in me. Enjoys me. Actually likes me. We want to spend time with people we know enjoy us. If I asked Callum, 'hey mate, do you want to come with me to Taupo to do a thing?' If he thinks I don't like him, what is going to be his response? But if he knows I enjoy his company, it's like, 'yeah bro, I know a place we can crash, let's make a road trip of it, I'll bring the snacks and sort the playlist.' Without this revelation, asking people to pray is like asking them to spend time with someone they think doesn't like them.

In our Gospel reading this morning, we heard of the heavens opening and God declaring at Jesus' Baptism, "this is my beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased." In whom I delight. In whom I enjoy. In whom I like. In Mark's Gospel, it says that the heavens were "torn open," like God is an eager child tearing into a much-anticipated present. By virtue of my baptism, of being co-heirs with Christ and adopted as a child of God, God delights in me, the same enjoyment God had for Jesus at his baptism, God has for me. Even, and perhaps especially when there's nothing to show for the relationship on my end. 'If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.' This revelation that God looks at me and sees Jesus coming up out of the water was so profound that I got a massive dove tattooed on my chest, and the words, "This is my beloved son, in whom I delight."

The rest of Psalm 139 says that God knows us completely. That God perceives our thoughts from afar, is familiar with all our ways, and that before a word is on our tongue God knows it completely. Yet God still likes us and enjoys us. Like the father in the parable, God will start running the moment we are seen dragging our feet on the horizon. God is not surprised by anything we do, ever. When you do something that you regret, something stupid, something hurtful - when you think: I can't believe I did that. God is not surprised. God is not put off our immaturity and weakness.

Nothing in all the cosmos can separate us from the love of God, and that, I've learnt, includes ourselves.

To the young people (and everyone really): God loves you. God's not surprised or frustrated by the things you do, think or say, waiting for you to get your act together. God loves you. Likes and enjoys you even. Right now. Not waiting for you to mature before God will like you. Perhaps, like me, the very thing that you think is cutting you off from relationship is the very thing that could be the place of breakthrough to greater understanding, and deeper relationship with God. God made you and delights in you, despite what your parents may or may not of intended, despite any messages you may have taken on along the way. God has searched you and knows you - and isn't put off by what he sees.

The story comes full circle. In my early twenties, I received a conviction that even though I might have forgiven my dad, that I needed to bless him. Before Buzzy and I got engaged, I took her over to meet him. We spent some time, and the back of my mind, I was thinking, okay, how do I bless my dad. What does that even look like? One day, he saw the top of the tattoo and asked about it, and I shared with him some of this journey, of coming to know God as a loving father, despite my experiences. On our last evening there, after dinner, I told them my intentions of marrying Buzzy, and asked if we could pray together. I still didn't know what it looked like to bless him. There was a long moment of freighted silence, then my dad prayed through his own tears, "thank you God for my beloved son, in whom I delight." After this I was able to bless him, to tell him that he was forgiven by myself, my brother and sister.

This is my message this morning, hard won for me, and maybe revelation needs to be for us to really believe it: God intimately created you, knitting you together in your mother's womb. God is proud of you, and has adopted you, giving you the Spirit by which you can cry out 'Abba, Father.' And God enjoys you, delights in you. God looks at you and sees Jesus coming up out of the Jordan. This is my beloved son, this is my beloved daughter, in whom I delight.