

Fathers and Mothers – Jesus College, Oxford. 27th October 2013.

Gen 17: 15-22; John 19: 25-27.

Recent study of 2000 parents of teenagers - what makes parents uncool:

- Owning a sensible car
- Not knowing what spotify is
- Singing and dancing around the house
- Not being able to work an i-phone
- Having a tattoo
- Not having a tattoo.

Seems it's impossible for parents to get it right, that parents of teenagers shouldn't try to be cool or that it's the job of parents to embarrass their children!

But our relationship with our parents is very important, it is the first relationship we know, it's the fundamental relationship. Pictures of front pages of most newspapers this week of Prince George with his parents at his Christening. Beautiful picture on the front on the chapel card – difficult to know where each figure – mother, father, child – begins or ends, such is their interconnection. Sadly it's true that if this fundamental relationship is flawed or lacking – it can affect us adversely for the rest of our life, if this relationship is good then it can set us up for the rest of our life.

Fathers and mothers - parents and children.

Two Biblical models to help our exploring:

From Genesis – we heard the promise to Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son. This forms part of the narrative about God's covenant with Abraham. To denote the change in relationship between them, there is a name change from Abram to Abraham which means "Father of many". Sarah too has a name change (Sarah means princess) for she is to be the "mother of nations". In order to fulfil this promise, God tells Abraham and Sarah that they are to have a son. This prediction makes Abraham laugh, it seems so absurd – he is 100, Sarah is 90 – far too old to have children, it seems ridiculous, Sarah too will laugh when she hears. And yet, even in their extreme old age, they have a son – Isaac, whose name means "he laughs".

You could imagine the confusion if the old couple went to register for child benefit and being told that surely they should be applying for a pension.

Isaac is an important person, because he is the beginning of a long line of sons and daughters – a dynasty that dominates the Biblical narrative. A hugely dysfunctional family with extreme examples of sibling rivalry and bad parenting. But a family, interconnected relationships. Would make a wonderful episode of “Who do you think you are”

The whole Jewish faith is based on this one family (flawed though it is) and family remains important, in the Judeo-Christian trad we often talk about the church being a family.

John 19 – Jesus speaking to his mother from the cross. Mary too, is an important figure in the life of the faith. Asked as a young girl to be the mother of God’s son, could have had no idea of the cost of that decision. Jesus must have been quite a challenging child to parent – wandering off in Jerusalem aged 12 spending 3 days with the teachers in the temple, confusing things he said, seeming to disown his family at times. Yet here Mary is, at the foot of the cross, watching her son humiliated and in agony, unable to help him, knowing that he had done nothing wrong, and now entrusted to the care of John. We know that she became a significant member of the early church.

Abraham and Sarah are described as the mother and father of the Judeo-Christian faith. Jesus was part of a human family and he called God his father.

The image of a father and/or a mother for God is a very powerful one. Nowhere more so than in the parable or the prodigal son (or two sons, or absent mother).

Rembrandt’s painting “The Return of the Prodigal” is esp powerful, revisiting it at the moment with a couple of home groups in my churches. I don’t know if you’re familiar with the painting, but its focus is the warm embrace between the father and the returning younger son. One of the most striking things about the painting is the contrast between the two hands of the father – one is a large and strong while the other is smaller and more delicate. Most people assume that one hand is male and the other female – so that God represents both masculine and feminine, both mother and father. If God is father, he loves as a parent – mother and father – loves their child.

I know that from my experience, that I had a profound new understanding of God's love when I became a parent, when I experienced the love of a mother for her child – a love that means I would do anything for my child – I had a new insight into God's love for me and God's love for all his creation and for each person within it.

As I arrived at our home group – the host, was in a rather agitated state, he and his wife were looking after their grandsons and Will, who's 3 had lost a bunch of keys – the house keys, car keys – the lot - and he couldn't remember where he'd put them. They needed the keys first thing in the morning so it was essential that they were found. We all started in the search, but to no avail, ironic as we were about to study the parable of the lost son! Will knew that his Granddad was upset, he knew that he'd done something wrong and that his granddad was cross with him and he was a bit confused. At one point he reached up to his granddad and I found it really touching that he was so secure in the granddad's love for him and the response that he would receive from him, that even though he'd done wrong he was confident that his granddad wouldn't turn him away but would receive him and embrace him. I found that to be a wonderful picture of God's love for us and God who longs for us to know his love as a parent (or a grandparent) loves their child. (They later found the keys, so all was well)

Fathers and mothers, parents and children - powerful love and a profound picture of God's love for his creation, his children.