

THE FACE OF FATHER

In the 1970's and 80's, I was a young man preparing for marriage and family. These were the days when men were being "liberated," generally with a certain amount of resistance.

"Liberated" meant that the older stereotypes regarding men and women were breaking down, and that the previous tried-and-true roles for each sex no longer held up. No more was there any such thing as what monolithically was expected from fathers or mothers.

In those days Dads everywhere were fundamentally identified with the workplace; and Moms were fundamentally identified with the home and with the kids. Dad was responsible for bringing in the paycheck that kept the household's expenses covered, while Mom was responsible for everything that kept the household clean and organized and harmonious.

It was this model that came under attack in the 70's and 80's, when already-liberated women began to question the validity of such a simple, rigid Ozzie-and-Harriet division of labors. Why exactly was it, they demanded to know, that a man should focus on career and a woman should focus merely on home and family?

Among thinking people, there really were no good answers by which to defend the preserving of the old gender-roles--which meant that men, like it or not, were inevitably "liberated" to the likes of the vacuum-cleaner and the tasks of childcare. As the stereotypes crumbled, fathers were more and more also found at the stove cooking, or running the dust cloth over the furniture, or tending to a load in the washing machine.

Oh, there were--and are--little backward pockets of the old ways that remained--or that remain--in force, but for the most part the face of father has changed forever.

I share that slice of American history with you, not only because you may have lived through those days yourself, but because something similar occurs within Scripture.

It is abundantly clear that, most especially in the Hebrew texts (what we refer to as the Old Testament), it is the masculine that is in the ascendant position. To be sure, there are stories here and there of women exemplars and heroines, but for the most part Biblical "history" is indeed "his story," not "her story."

What follows naturally is the firm conviction that the Deity, that Yahweh, is indisputably male. In the whole corpus of Christian Holy Writ, one will not find the feminine pronoun anywhere used to refer to God. God is singularly "He," and He is therefore "Father."

In the earliest references to God as Father, the implication is that "He" is Lord, Creator of all, Sustainer of all, and in the end Judge of all. God the Father is fundamentally associated with order and with law--at the beginning defeating the primordial chaos, and thereafter keeping that chaos at bay by issuing a very long catalogue of commandments to which the faithful are required to adhere.

The price for failing to do so--in effect, choosing chaos over God-ordained order--is the cosmic equivalent of "just wait until your father gets home!" For those who willfully fail to obey the stern, exacting Father's injunctions, there's a terrible "whupping" to come. It is a message that yields the clear impression that God, the Father, though He might have His kindly and generous moments, is essentially humorless and scary and punishing.

All this brings us to this morning's reading, which may seem like a rather strange one since it concerns the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. What is in this old Holy Week memory which possibly links it to the occasion of Father's Day?

It is this: There on his knees, shaking with dread regarding what is about to occur, Jesus prays, "*Abba*, Father" (Mk 14.36). "*Abba*," he says. "Father."

What is *Abba*? Actually, it is the Aramaic word for "Father." I want to make something of that fact. You see, the New Testament is written in Greek, which has a word for "father"; it is *pater* (as in the English words "paternal" or "paternity" or "paternalistic"). So, why does Mark insert into the text something as obscure as an Aramaic word, when there is a perfectly agreeable Greek word immediately at hand?

I can think of no reason except that: (a) unknown to many of us, Aramaic happens to be the language that Jesus actually speaks (he doesn't speak Hebrew, nor does he speak Greek); and (b) that there is an early memory, with which the evangelist is familiar, which recalls Jesus' referring to God as *Abba*. In other words, in this little word, we may have a flash of historical insight into Jesus' relationship with the Father.

And that insight into Jesus reveals that, just as happens a few decades ago here in America, the face of the Father is changing. Jesus' use of the word *Abba* suggests that no more do we have in God the aloof, austere, demanding Lord of the Law; on the contrary, we have a God who is intimately involved in the goings-on of the universe. Here in Jesus, we have a God who is near at hand, engaged, caring.

While there has been hot debate about it, some linguists have gone so far as to suggest that the translation "Father" may be too formal a substitution for the Aramaic *Abba*, that the title is perhaps better rendered as something like "Daddy"--a point of view that may be supported by modern Hebrew, where the word *abba* has, in fact, come to be used commonly for "Daddy." *

Abba, then, could be related to such words as "Dada" or "Papa" or "Baba" as terms for the father that carry the sense of genuine endearment. In all these instances, the relationship to the father is marked, not, as it was in the past, by cold distance or fearful anticipation, but by personal intimacy and close familiarity.

As God has typically been taught to many of us, that possible nuance very much changes the face of the heavenly Father.

So, where exactly does this leave us? It leaves us, in a twofold sense, with a decision to make:

Will we remain stuck in the old ways of imagining human fatherhood as just going to work and administering punishment when required--or will we move ahead to being more than simply the lawgiver in our families, to be available and tender, and to be no stranger to such things as taking the 2 a.m. feeding of the baby or unloading the dishwasher?

Correspondingly, will we remain stuck in the old ways of perceiving God as disappointed and angry at us all the time, just looking for a good opportunity to smack us down--or will we move ahead, following Jesus' lead, by not making ourselves an unwitting stranger to a God who is immediately available and warmly involved in our daily lives?

On both scores, over the years, the face of father has changed a lot.

To what degree have we kept pace? How much have we changed?

**Interestingly, the only two other places in the New Testament where “Abba” occurs are both found in Paul, both also associated with being children in God:*

- *Romans 8.15-16: “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear; but you have 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
- *Galatians 4.6-7: “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, then also an heir, through God.”*