

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 31st March 2019

Luke 15: 11 - 32

Two of the hymns we are singing in this service this morning are new hymns to St. Ninian's, although we sang one of them two or three weeks ago. We are singing them for a reason. They both draw on the words of the English Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich. Julian wrote two very short books called her *Revelations* in which she describes her relationship with God. There are a number of startling things contained within her writing, but probably the most startling is her description of God as a mother; today is Mothering Sunday.

On Mothering Sunday, it is good to reflect on the extent to which we can or cannot, the extent to which we should or should not, talk about God as a mother, the motherhood of God. Imagining God as a mother is not an unproblematic thing to do, mainly because there are so many references throughout the Bible to God as a father; the reading we read from the Gospel this morning being just one example. God is described and imagined so often as a father that describing God as a mother is to some minds, wrong, and to many others, so strange and unusual as to be unhelpful.

However, Julian of Norwich was not put off by bad theology or fear of the unusual, for her, in her writings, imagining God as a mother was an accurate thing to do; was something that could help people encounter God in the way that God acts and lives in our lives; and was something that contained a deep theological truth. She was quite comfortable writing a prayer that contained the words, "In Jesus, our true mother, has our life been grounded through **his** own uncreated foresight, and the Father's almighty power..."

This gender-bending prayer of Julian's in which she describes Jesus as a man and a mother, sounds very modern, perhaps too modern for some sensibilities, yet Julian lived and wrote 600 years ago. She wasn't the first to write of God, or Jesus, as a mother. Anslem of Canterbury, a great medieval theologian, saint and archbishop wrote a prayer 900 years ago that contained the words, "And you, Jesus, are you not also a mother? Are you not the mother who, like a hen gathers her chickens under her wings?"

The idea that God might be described as a mother is clearly a biblical one – we read two weeks ago that description, which Jesus used of himself as a mother hen. The motherhood of Jesus is clearly a very ancient idea, but in 1984 that didn't stop the Church of Scotland's General Assembly finding the whole notion that God had been described for over 900 years in female terms, far too modern. In 1982 the then President of the Church of Scotland Guild began a prayer at the Guild's national meeting with the words "Dear Mother God, you gave birth to all life..." Her temerity and daring resulted in a theological report to the General Assembly two years later called, "The Motherhood of God" which the Assembly, even though it had commissioned the Report, refused to even discuss, never mind debate, and which it still hasn't.

Refusing to discuss the Report on the Motherhood of God in 1984 was not the General Assembly's finest hour. But, fortunately for the Church debates at the General Assembly are not the standard by which all things are measured. Since 1984 things have moved on in the life of our Church. The Church of Scotland's Book of Common Order – the General Assembly's prayer book that forms the basis for our worship - has, for the past ten years, contained a prayer that begins, "God our father, mother, creator, protector, made in your image, we adore you..."

Today, in 2019, 25 years after the publication of the most recent edition of the Book of Common Order, praying in a Church of Scotland to God our mother is normal, I used that very prayer for the Book of Common Order this morning, no one walked out. That wouldn't have been the case in Churches of Scotland during the latter years of the 20th century even if in the latter years of the 14th century Julian of Norwich could, without controversy, imagine God as a mother.

Times change, culture changes, our imaginations develop, our wisdom deepens, our love for humanity – for men and women – grows wider. Whereas, there was once a time when there were things about which we would not speak, now we speak of them without difficulty: God is not just our heavenly father, but our heavenly mother too; Jesus, acting in the place of God, mothers us. How we imagine mothers hasn't changed, but how we imagine God, has.

Today, in the 21st century, in 2019, the times are still changing. Whereas, with the motherhood of God, our understanding of God has developed, with the Fatherhood of God it is our understanding of fathers that is changing.

Our Gospel reading this morning is the Lectionary's proscribed reading for the fourth Sunday in Lent, and it is ironic that on what is always Mothering Sunday, the reading should be about a father; ironic, but not unhelpful.

For if our understanding of God has long needed to recognise God's motherhood, it is our understanding of what a father is that has long needed to change to reflect better how we understand God. If our understanding of God has needed to change to reflect a more female and mothering image, then our understanding of what a father can be has for a long time needed to change to reflect something more divine.

Fatherhood is a cultural thing. Ota is a hunter-gatherer who lives in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He is a father. His family sustains itself by hunting for small animals using nets. It is not easy, and it requires the help of all members of his family. Because the family is always together Ota plays an equal role in singing to, comforting, bathing, and feeding his children. Indeed, he is more likely to share a bed with them than their mother is, and he will offer a crying baby his nipple to suckle if mum is unavailable.

Mike is a lawyer who lives in Boston and works long hours, rarely seeing his children. He does this so that his children can benefit from going to a good school, live in a nice part of the city, and enjoy the privileges that wealth brings in the ultracompetitive environment of 21st century western city living. Mike is a member of the local country club, and at weekends he takes his youngest kids swimming while his oldest joins him on the golf course with his father's friends and business partners to learn the ropes of sociability in the culture he will grow up to live and work in.

Sigis is a farmer who lives in the highlands of Kenya. He spends his time like Mike – he is the family breadwinner and he also hardly sees his younger children. But, when his sons reach late childhood, he will spend a lot of his time with them teaching them how to run the farm. He will spend his leisure time with them as well when they become adolescents, whereas he will leave his daughters exclusively in the care of their mother.

James lives in Somerset and while his wife, a PR executive, often travels abroad, he stays at home as the primary carer for their three children. He is a dab hand at juggling ballet, football, play-dates, parties, providing meals and homework support, and volunteering on the school PTA.

Four fathers, four different cultures, four different ways of doing it. A fifth way of doing it from yet another culture is in our Gospel reading this morning. This father, the one who against his better judgement nevertheless gives his son what his son asks for, and who, when his son leaves, spends his life longing for his son's return, watching out for it, and when his son does return, he feels his heart reaching out across a great distance, he runs to meet his son when his son is still a long way off, and he flings his arms around him and kisses him.

This father is most definitely not a cold, distant, disciplinarian who has disappointment etched across his face when his son doesn't achieve what was expected of him. This father is a father who lives in the cultural society that we call the kingdom of God. This father is a father who looks a lot like a mother. Try it. Replace the word father with the word mother in the parable from the 20th verse on, and the parable sounds perfectly fine, there is no jarring discomfort at God, the father, being described as a mother.

This parable would have been a favourite for Julian of Norwich. Not only is God the father better imagined as a mother in this parable, but in this parable repentance is also described in terms that she imagined it should be.

Julian wrote her Revelations at the end of the 14th century, at the time of the Inquisition. Repentance back then was horrible; it wasn't unusual at all for people to be brought back to God through torture. Indeed, Julian ran that risk herself, such was her insistence on proclaiming the motherhood of God. But, she persevered not just in describing God as a mother, but in the wholly radical idea that repentance was not something to be frightened of.

Repent, you sinner, was not for her the cliché of Presbyterianism: the scowling minister in his pulpit; the wagging finger; the banging Bible; the raised voice; the black gown. No, for Julian, repentance was what happened when you turned your life around, and it felt like being welcomed home into your mother's arms. And, it should be, into your father's arms.

In recent years there has been more work done on what it means to be a father. In the UK last year Dr. Anna Machin, a psychologist, published a book entitled *The Life of Dad*, from which I drew the cultural examples of fatherhood earlier. In the United States in 2014 Paul Raeburn published *Do Fathers Matter?* Both books examine fatherhood from a scientific perspective. Both books find that the differences between being a mother and being a father are so small they are bridgeable by either sex.

I wonder if we should lay aside our gender-based assumptions, and ask whether we need fathers and mothers. Can the word parent not suffice, especially in a world where parents are quite likely to be of the same sex, or just one person trying to do two jobs? Perhaps, or perhaps not. What we do need to understand though is that whether we are a father or a mother or a parent, parenting should be a lot like the model of parenthood that this morning's parable gave us, for that is the culture of the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is like the open armed loving embrace and kiss of the parable. We should repent and turn to this God, portrayed in this parable, because if we do then perhaps we'll find that our church, our communities, our families, our country, will themselves be more like this parable: places that feel like growing up in a home in which you are nurtured, respected, cared for, free, loved, by parents who would, when you repent, when you need them to be there for you, place the very best robe on your back, the finest ring on your finger and shoes on your feet.