

If you cast your minds back a few months then you might remember that the first Sunday without public Mass in this country was Mothering Sunday or Mothers' Day. Today in this country we celebrate Fathers' Day. Mothers' Day has a link to the liturgical calendar because it is always celebrated on the Fourth Sunday of Lent which is three weeks before Easter. There is no such liturgical link with Fathers' Day, but the fact that in today's Gospel Reading (Matthew 10:26-33) Jesus talks about his and our Father in heaven provides an opportunity for some reflections on 'fatherhood' to mark Fathers' Day.

I would like to reflect on 'the Fatherhood of God', then 'human fatherhood', and then 'on priests as fathers'. It is important to begin with 'the Fatherhood of God' before considering our personal experiences of fatherhood because to do it the other way around would risk us imposing our own ideas and images drawn from our personal and cultural history upon God rather than allowing God to reveal himself to us as 'Father' through the Scriptures and above all through Jesus the Son.

When Jesus invited his disciples to address their prayers to 'Our Father' it wasn't something entirely foreign to them for the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) does refer to God as Father on a number of occasions. However Jesus reveals God as Father in a previously unheard-of sense, through the eternal Father - Son relationship which the Father and Jesus share. So when Jesus speaks about the Father he speaks with a unique authority, not from human experience, but from an eternal sharing in the life of the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There are many examples of Jesus teaching about the Father, today's Gospel reading is but one. Jesus tells his disciples 'not to be afraid' because not a single sparrow falls to the ground without the Father knowing. Especially at a time of crisis like the present how reassuring is it that we are not alone but that everything is in the hands of our heavenly Father to whom we are worth more than hundreds of sparrows.

Human fatherhood is called to reflect God's fatherhood. Fathers are called to give their children (both in childhood and also in adult life) that reassurance that they can go out into the world with confidence, that there is someone who is always looking out for them. If that has been our experience in life then today is a good opportunity to give thanks. If our experience has been otherwise (either of being a father or of being a child) then it is important to acknowledge this too. However we must guard against letting our less than perfect human experiences prevent us from accepting God's fatherhood in our lives, but rather we continue to dare to call God 'Our Father' as Jesus has taught us to.

In the English speaking world priests are usually addressed as 'Father'. When I was first ordained I found this very humbling, especially when addressed so by people more than double my age. Now there aren't many people who are double my age, and it is easy to become complacent. However Fathers' Day is a good reminder to me (and I am sure to other priests too) about what our place is to be in the parish community. As we pray for our dads, grandfathers, and step-fathers today, please also pray for me and for other priests that in our lives and ministries we might reflect to our parishioners something of the Fatherhood of God.