

Beyond Belief. Abba...

Some time ago, I was invited to be interviewed by BBC Radio 4. They were preparing a programme on various aspects of religious belief. The Programme was entitled; 'Beyond Belief'. It was just a short 30 minute slot to go out in the late weekday afternoon.

The programme was designed to explore the notion of Fatherhood with reference to the Christian attitude towards God. It was to be broadcast shortly before Fathers' Day, the invention of which I have tended to regard as an imported commercial exercise. However there you go.

It was a little peculiar in that I was not informed beforehand who the other participants might be. However when I subsequently heard the broadcast, I recognised them as distinguished Catholic academics I had previously encountered as members of the Catholic Theological Association to which I belonged for a number of years. They didn't let on that they knew me anyway. Each of them admitted at the outset, to addressing God as Father sometimes in their prayers. Hence there was no contention. I myself was invited to be interviewed down the line from Manchester in a small cubicle in the offices of the new BBC Radio Merseyside building. It was rather an odd experience to sit alone in a small soundproof room with quite large earphones pressed to my head and a large globular microphone a few centimetres from my mouth. However it seemed to go fairly well. They told me they were pleased with the result and there would be little editing necessary.

I had been apparently recommended to them as someone who had over the years a multifarious experience of 'fatherhood'. What this experience was I trust will emerge.

To start with, I was asked about my own experience of fatherhood i.e. of my own father, during my childhood and adolescence. I replied that my own concept of fatherhood during that period had not been a very helpful one in my personal religious development. To think of God as a Father was problematic. When I was completing a one year course in Religious Education in London in the mid-sixties, we were warned that the image of God as 'father' might not be a very helpful one. For many children it might be just the opposite. For some coming as they might from broken homes, 'father' might be thankfully have been absent from the scene.

I was never very close to my own father and I was determined that if and when I had children of my own to be as unlike him as possible! My father spent every evening at the Parish Club and drank more than was good for him. Even now I get a little anxious when I recognise something of his appearance in me when I look in the mirror!

I could never remember him expressing any word of love to any of his four children. I cannot recall any physical hugs, handshakes etc. No tenderness at all. I do remember the strap across the legs, though! In retrospect, from my perspective now, I can understand a little why this was perhaps so. It was wartime. There was compulsory billeting. The house in Harrogate seemed to be constantly full of women- WAAF's, Civil Servants, etc. He must have felt a little oppressed. No space to sit quietly on his own. Every room seemed to be constantly occupied.

Hence I had difficulty imagining the Father that Jesus would have us address as 'abba' and envisaging him as loving, caring, forgiving, sharing and totally vulnerable.

The eight years when I was studying for the priesthood in the fifties did little to soften this image of fatherhood I'm afraid. The seminary was a fairly soulless place only meliorated by the loyalties and camaraderie of my fellow students. Staff had to be addressed as 'Sir' not 'Father' and offered no friendly relationship. There seemed to be constantly an atmosphere of anxiety and of not being caught breaking any of the multitude of rules.

The interviewer was then interested in my experiences of 'fatherhood' during the time I was working as a priest.

I replied that in the ten years I spent working as a curate in the Leeds diocese, I tried to be a father to parishioners as best I could. In so many ways it was a very enriching experience, one that I continue to be grateful for. Home visiting was very much the custom of the day. Releasing those oppressed from the hidden guilt they might be burdened with, comforting the bereaved, bringing the Eucharist to the sick and elderly especially on First Fridays, helping to run Youth clubs, taking the Scout Troop camping and offering Mass in their midst, and so on. All these activities I hope enabled them perhaps through me to encounter something of the loving 'Abba' that Jesus spoke of so beautifully.

When ten years later, in my late thirties, the Bishop was to ask me somewhat incredulously why I wished to resign from the ministry, the only answer I personally could give was that the only way in which I felt that I could remain a Christian was to become a husband and a father. This was the path along which I felt that God was calling me. This is certainly not true of so many other dedicated priests who live long selfless celibate lives loving and caring for their parishioners

However this was the major reason why I myself felt I had to resign.

Fatherhood in the years of my own ministry as a priest was naturally limited by so often being on the periphery of people lives, being unable to share in a close physical sense the experience of creative fatherhood.

I feel sure that the Bishop neither understood nor sympathised. I suppose that it was understandable at that time.

The interviewer then went on to express interest in my experience as a natural father with four children of my own. How had this widened and perhaps deepened my understanding of 'fatherhood'? How did it help me to explore the meaning which Jesus had pointed to when he taught his followers to address God as a loving 'abba' or papa? (It is interesting here to note that this is the origin of the title 'Pope').

In having children of my own, my experience of fatherhood has altered quite radically, I am pleased to say. Very different new insights began to emerge. I suspect that it has a great deal to do with the loving influence of my bereaved wife, Marie, both for me and for each of them.

The most precious compliment to me came from my eldest son, David, now in his thirties and a policeman working as a detective in the Birmingham area. He said to me once "Dad, I just want to be as good a father to my own children as you have been to us."

I think I now understand a little just what it means to address God as 'Father',

It means:

Always to be on my children's side. Always to be loving and forgiving. Plenty of hugs without being overpowering

It is at this point that I can understand God the Father's deep need to be in *physical* contact with us, his children; to take on human existence; to offer to us the gift of His

Flesh and Blood in the Eucharist' The touch of his Body. How often in the Gospels is Jesus seen healing by *touching*. When the prodigal returns it is into the aching arms of his father.

To be a father has meant: sharing without patronising or demeaning; loving each child as though each was the only one; knowing them individually by their name; hoping to find the best of me in them, but being ready to let them go when the time came, for freedom is the only gift worth having. The dreadful pain of vulnerability. I think I understood the parable of the lost sheep on an occasion when we lost our son whilst Marie and I were busy browsing the books in a Newquay bookshop. Horrified to discover he was with neither of us, we endured the torment of the missing son. How Joseph and Mary must have agonized after their visit to the Temple in Jerusalem! The agony and panic was almost unbearable until I found him sitting quietly and shocked beside the fire in the lounge of the Police house cared for by the Policeman's wife. To be a father means to guide and discipline your child by love rather than by anger, law or fear. To forgive even before forgiveness is sought. 'God forgave us whilst we were still in our sins' says Paul. I will never forget the delight as I stood beside my Marie as she brought each child at birth into the long journey of life. I understood how 'Abba' must have felt in that stable at Bethlehem as Mary brought forth from her womb his only Son.

The final point of interest for the interviewer was to question me about the next stage in my experience of fatherhood. Some years ago Marie sadly died leaving me with four children. Not long after, I married a widow, Angela, who herself had lost her partner, leaving her with five children of a similar age to my own. This was quite a new time for being a father. I was now an adoptive father. I was asked whether any new insights came from this experience. What was my experience of fathering children to whom I was not related to biologically?

My reply was to say that though the relationship could not be so intense and is obviously limited by the fact that they were already formed when we entered each others' lives, nevertheless they have accepted me as their stepfather with incredible generosity, and I have tried hard not to differentiate between them and my own 'biological' children. Outsiders said from the outset that they were not sure which was which. One of my loveliest moments came a few days ago when Polly came in the front door with Rachel her mum, she is just two, and wrapped her arms around my legs and said 'Papa'. We have taught the children of Angela to address me as 'Papa' and not granddad.

The woman, who produced the programme, Rosie Dawson, said at the end, that she herself was an adoptive mother. She said that she was always struck by the quotation from the Christmas collect that we are God's children: "by adoption and by grace". And so Jesus taught us to pray:

Our Father.....

Andrew Bebb