
Can we still call God Father?

Romans 8.12-17

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 7, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I once went to have dinner with some friends who lived and worked in a youth center. The youth center board meeting was going on the same evening in an adjoining room. When the meeting broke up, a board member appeared in my friends' kitchen with a trolley of china coffee cups and cookie plates. One of my friends looked half playfully, half combatively at the man who'd appeared with the trolley. "I guess you were hoping we were going to wash those up for you" she said. "Oh – I'm sorry," said the man, with a plaintive look that suggested he knew he was already committed to an explanation that was only going to make things worse. "I didn't mean to put you out. It's just that we used to have some women on the board and they used to do the dishes after our meetings."

Those were the days. Those still are the days in some quarters. That man was dimly aware that the world he'd grown up in was changing. But he knew he was way out of his depth in the new world he was entering. If you're being charitable, you say his attitudes are dumb but harmless. You're likely to call him a dinosaur. If you're being less charitable, you say he's determined to preserve power in the hands of men and keep women in servile roles. You're likely to accuse him of chauvinism or patriarchy. The reason I still think about this man 20 years after that evening is that he lived in a cocooned world in which there was nothing that made him think or feel he was saying anything inappropriate.

And that's the real point. For him, we all have our station in life. Men belong at the top. Whether that's because of strength, or intelligence, or habit, or divine decree is seldom quite clear. From this point of view to call God our father comes out of the same set of assumptions. The father God puts a divine stamp on a patriarchal human package. And that's why today calling God our father has become so problematic. It seems both to endorse and legitimize a world in which men run the show and women clean up afterwards.

Before we look at whether we can still call God father, I want to pause and recognize the grief for many of leaving that old world behind. For all its shortcomings, it offered a security that many are finding it hard now to live without. Every young woman who comes to Duke knows that her role is to excel. She's to pursue an outstanding career, have an enviable social life, produce a trophy family, maintain a magnificent figure and achieve a perfect work-life balance. Anyone who questions this is an enemy of freedom and anyone who feels it may represent just a new set of burdens for women is likely to be accused of endorsing the old patriarchal package. Meanwhile many men feel paralyzed and anxious in a new world where whatever efforts they make to equalize the burdens of life, it's somehow never enough. The suspicion always lingers that they'd gladly welcome back the patriarchal package should it ever become socially acceptable again.

On a good day this brave new world is one of uninhibited fulfillment and dreamlike mutuality. On a bad day it turns relationships into simmering cauldrons of pent-up resentment interrupted periodically by explosions of defeated exasperation. Sometimes it feels we've gained freedom, but on the way we've lost the joy.

I believe the question of whether we can still call God father belongs in this context of bewilderment and confusion over male and female roles in the new world that has come to pass in the last 50 years. Take the proposal to change the words "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" to "Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer." It sounds like a way of making God more wholesome, a way of focusing on the action of God rather than getting bogged down in God's identity. It may be a recognition that the language of Father is painful for some, especially perhaps those who've been physically, sexually or emotionally hurt by someone they had every reason to trust. These motivations are perfectly genuine. There's no doubt that for some the word Father in itself is an obstacle to faith. But it's very hard indeed to keep the conversation about God and not let language about God become simply an exalted way of talking about ourselves. Anyone who stands up for the language of God the Father risks being accused of wanting to restore the whole patriarchal package. The conversation about the identity of God quickly opens out our profound anxiety about negotiating the new set of male and female roles available to us.

Reclaiming the feminine language of God is an important project. Jesus really does describe himself as a mother hen. Several times in the Bible we read the vivid language of “womb” and “breasts” and “labor pains” as attributes of God. We need to introduce more of this feminine scriptural imagery into the way we talk about God, not just because the patriarchal language has some troubling resonances, but because this imagery gives us a richer understanding of who God is. The church has been very slow to recognize these things.

But if the real issue is that men have so often been violent and abusive and domineering, we should come right out and say that rather than diverting it into a conversation about God. Maybe the issue isn't about changing the language of our heavenly Father. It's about changing the lives of our earthly fathers. The problem isn't so much the way God is Father. The problem is the way *I'm* a father. It's time for men to become the kinds of fathers that God is. If they all were, I'm not sure this conversation would seem quite so urgent as it does right now.

The joy of Christianity is that we've been made in God's image. But the danger of Christianity is that we're constantly tempted to recast God in our own image. This isn't a new problem. In every generation Christians have been inclined to portray God along the lines of what seemed good and right and true in the society of their time. It's perfectly natural for us to articulate the highest ideals of what today we aspire to and project those onto God. But it's obvious what's wrong with this approach. It makes God into a product of our creative imaginations. We become the creator and God becomes the creature. We turn into divine editors, going through every aspect of God's script, correcting it for errors; or into divine professional trainers, toning up the parts of God's body we deem to be out of shape. God becomes a show pony for our own high ideals.

So the question becomes, do we relegate the language of God the Father to one image among many, and a suspicious one at that, because of its associations with the patriarchal package of male dominance and female subservience? Or is there still something vital about the language of Father that transcends the patriarchal package and we need to keep at the center of our faith, even if some of us find that a real struggle? I want to dwell briefly on two themes.

(1) First, when Jesus says Abba, he doesn't mean a seventies Swedish pop group but he doesn't mean Father in our conventional sense either. The word means Daddy. If you've ever had the privilege of putting a child to bed and seeing its trusting eyes and bending down your ear and hearing the child whisper a question of utter existential urgency you'll know what I mean. “Daddy, is tomorrow forever?” This is a profound, intimate and nonsexual relationship, one of joy and trust and frustration and misunderstanding and endurance and touch and warmth and tears and love. You don't get much of that in the word Creator. Creator's a job title. Granted, you don't get a lot of job postings with that precise title, even on the Divinity School's website. It's a big job and it's hard to get the salary level right. But you don't *love* a job title, even if that title is Creator of the Universe. Creator isn't fundamentally about relationship. What calling God Father really means is that the inner life of God is always a relationship, always an intimate, trusting, dynamic exchange, and so when in the miracle of grace you and I are invited to be in relationship with God we're invited to join a relationship that's already going on. We may be able to find other words but whatever they are they need to express this central truth. God loves passionately and intimately, but non-exclusively, and the words we use need to convey this.

(2) And the second theme that affirms God as Father means getting away from the idea that the father is the only one who really matters. I have a theory that in most families there's one strong character and nothing really functions unless that person's happy. Everything's organized to ensure that person gets their sleep, food and TV-watching on cue, as if they were a baby. The Trinity isn't like that. It's not a hierarchy, and the Son and the Holy Spirit aren't going around treading on eggshells in case the Father loses his temper.

When I was at high school I wanted to be the center of attention. I wanted to be an actor. In my first year at college I got a part in a play. It wasn't a play that changed the face of modern drama. But it changed me. Almost every line was funny, and for the first time I realized I didn't have to get all the laughs. For the first time I got as much joy out of setting up the other players for the funny lines. For the first time I discovered performing wasn't a competition for the audience's scarce attention, but a reveling in one another's gifts and interpretations.

The Trinity isn't a support structure for the Father to be the star. It's a circle in which each member is relishing the joy and the challenge of bringing the best out of one another. Hierarchies can be useful if and when they enable a group of people to relax for a while and know who does what and not get in each other's way. Our station in life is a role we take on for a limited period to get a job done as a team. Once you make a hierarchy more than that – once you start saying our station in life is a fixed part of our identity – it's a disaster. The Trinity isn't a fixed hierarchy. It's more like a company of actors that take different roles depending on the play they're performing. God is always in an inner relationship and at the same time in an outer relationship, with us. So the circumstances are always changing. The fun and the drama are always to discover how things will turn out this time. And in case we think this is turning into a fantasy summer camp from the sixties, of peace, freedom, cup cakes and crumbly candy bars, let's never forget that the cross seared the heart of God the Father and the Holy Spirit and not just the Son, and so at the heart of this mutually indwelling love is the reality of sacrifice.

So we've seen that God is fundamentally about nonexclusive relationship and nonhierarchical flourishing. There's nothing in the doctrine of the Trinity that underwrites the patriarchal package we continue to be so anxious about. The curious thing is that when we put the constructive characteristics of the God the Father on the table we see that if we're going to hold onto gender stereotypes, God's characteristics sound more female than male. In fact, for most of the history of the church it's been women rather than men who've best reflected the first person of the Trinity.

Now this is incredibly challenging for all of us. It means God is not a father in any stereotypical human way. It means when we come to speaking of the first person of the Trinity as Father we may have to put aside most of the usual resonances of that term, the bad ones and the good ones.

We could say, this is just silly, our gender stereotypes and bad associations aren't going to go away, so why not just coin another term? What's the point using the term Father if God the Father is so very different from most human fathers? There's really only one, simple, reason. And that is, because Father's the word Jesus used. Father's the word the second person of the Trinity used to speak to the first person.

The Old Testament hardly ever calls God "Father." Maybe a dozen times, if that. But in Jesus we get something we'd never seen before. We get a window into the inner-Trinitarian conversation. Jesus says a new word: "Daddy." Not once or twice but maybe 170 times. This is the most intimate, most loving, most precious, most vital relationship in the whole universe and beyond, and we've been allowed a window into it. Isn't that window a most incredible privilege?

And it turns out it's not just a window. Romans 8 tells us that through the Holy Spirit we've been invited into this most intimate and dynamic of all relationships. We've been drawn by adoption into the loving embrace of the Trinity. We're going to dance to the end of love. This is the most astonishing miracle of all. It's the miracle we rediscover every time we remember Jesus invited us to say "Our Father." Not just his father – *our* father. That's what these precious words mean – that there's a relationship at the heart of all things and by the miracle of grace we've been invited into it. The language of God the Father isn't shoehorning all of us, whatever our personal histories and whatever ways God has been revealed to us, into a one-size-fits-all take-it-or-leave-it form of prayer. To say Father isn't to express our *own* experience of God. We can do that in a hundred ways, female, male and beyond. Our own experience of God is important, but it's not what finally saves us. Our own intimate and diverse experiences of God, are not what the language of Father is finally about. The point is, to say "Father" is to celebrate that we've been drawn into *Jesus'* experience of being part of the Trinity. And it's *that* experience, rather than our own, that saves us.