

FATHER!

Matthew 6v9

This week 14 year old Michael Perham sailed into Antigua in his yacht "Cheeky Monkey" to become the youngest yachtsman to cross the Atlantic single-handed. He travelled 3,500 miles and it took him six weeks. But sailing two miles behind him was his dad! Although there could be no physical contact Peter Perham shadowed his son all the way. He kept in contact by radio, and they even sang carols together via satellite phones on Christmas day. Young Michael had to handle force 9 gales and 28ft waves, but he admitted that he was only scared once - when his satellite phone broke and he was out of contact with his dad. His dad was so proud of him. "*We had a few hurdles, but we got through them together*", he said. What a great model of fatherhood; and what a fascinating echo of God the Father and Son working together in redemption, and of God's relationship to us as our Father.

Today, as we begin a Week of Prayer at the start of 2007, I want to take you to some familiar words of Jesus at the beginning of the prayer he taught His disciples. **Our Father in heaven.** This will introduce us in a very simple way to the Doctrine of the Fatherhood of God. Today our focus is simply on the word "Father".

First we need to remind ourselves that no one spoke of God as "Father" in this way at that time; yet we find the word on Jesus lips 51 times in the first three Gospels and more than a hundred times in John's Gospel. And when Jesus prayed, His first word was invariably "Father".

- At the tomb of Lazarus: "Father, I thank you that you always hear me." (John 11v41)
- As he began his great High Priestly prayer: "Father, the time has come." (John 17v1)
- In Gethsemane Jesus used the most intimate Aramaic word for father: "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." (Mark 14v36) It was unthinkable for Jews to use such a word as "dad" or "papa" when addressing Almighty God. Yet this is what Jesus did.
- On the cross as Roman soldiers did their terrible duty : "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23v34)
- We even find the word on Jesus lips in His final words on the cross "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23v46)

All this was remarkable, even scandalous. On one occasion it provoked a charge of blasphemy. We understand now why Jesus could speak in this way - because of His unique identity and relationship to God. Jesus is the Son of God. He is God the Son.

But something even more amazing stares us in the face here in the Lord's Prayer. Jesus not only speaks of God and to God as "Father"; *He teaches His disciples to do the same.* And that is where we come in. *We too* can call God "Father".

The entrance to prayer for us is this simple word, "Father", because, through faith in Jesus we have now become God's children. Calling God "Father" here has nothing to do with God's Universal Fatherhood as Creator. It is very specific to those who know Jesus, who said *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."* (John 14v6f)

In the New Testament, becoming a disciple of Jesus is described in terms of becoming a child of God, or being adopted into God's family. You can call God "Father" because you have been born again. When you were seeking God you might have prayed *"GOD, if you are there, help me!"* But now the most natural thing in the world for you to say is, *"FATHER"*. You have become a child of God. God is your Father.

This is so important that one special function of the Spirit is to transfer this great truth from your head to your heart. Romans 8v15f: *'you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship (or "the Spirit of adoption"). And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.'*

Let's take on board what this is saying.

1. "Abba" is a child's word. Visit Israel today and you will hear little children addressing their father in this way. Similarly "Abba" in Romans 8 is a simple and spontaneous and childlike approach to God. We do not have to be clever or sophisticated. We do not have to know a lot of theology. We come to our Father in heaven like children. Jesus *"called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* (Matthew 18v2,3)

2. "Abba" is a word used by a son or daughter. In New Testament times slaves in households would never use this word. So here, Paul draws out the before- and-after contrast. Before we knew Christ we were in bondage to sin. But now we have been set free from slavery and are the children of God. We are His sons and His daughters. So now we cry "Abba", Father. This is very clear in Galatians 4v4-7: *'when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.'*

3. "Abba" is the very word Jesus used of His Father. God the Father fills us with the Spirit of His Son, Jesus the Messiah, so that we call out "Abba, Father", in the same way that Jesus did! God the Holy Trinity work together to make sure that we know how loved we are.

4. “Abba” here, is a cry! The apostle is not describing some intellectual process where you work the doctrine through logically to satisfy your mind that you are a child of God. He writes of crying out “Abba”, Father. This word was used to describe “a loud cry expressing deep emotion” It expresses “fervency” or “earnestness”. This is a strong feeling, which rises up within you, and explodes in a God-ward direction!

Howell Harris was a Welsh contemporary of John Wesley. On June 18th 1735 his diary records: *“Being in secret prayer I felt suddenly my heart melting within me like wax before a fire with love to God my Saviour. I felt not only love and peace, but also longing to be dissolved and to be with Christ; and there was a cry in my inmost soul, with which I was totally unacquainted before, it was this – “Abba, Father”; Abba, Father.” I could not help calling God my Father; I knew that I was his child, and that He loved me.”*

Romans 8v15 says this loud cry expressing deep emotion comes about as a result of “receiving” the Spirit of sonship, or adoption. It is a direct result of the Holy Spirit’s activity. This is not someone receiving the Spirit when they are spiritually reborn – otherwise many of us would doubt that we really are Christians! Some of us became Christians in a very unemotional way. No, this describes an experience of the Spirit quite distinct from salvation. It may be close to the time of your becoming a Christian or later.

Is this “Spirit of adoption” what is called elsewhere “baptism in (or with) the Spirit” or being “filled with the Spirit” or “sealed with the Spirit”? If so, then we might say that glorious assurance of sonship is a surer indication and more significant effect of receiving the Spirit than tongues speaking.

You might reasonably ask – does this mean then that I wait for the word “Abba” to spring to my lips? Not at all! Here are some ways in which “the Spirit of adoption” - knowing in your heart that you are a child of God, can affect you

- Your heart is warm towards God; you are moved emotionally
- You feel joy and delight in God
- God doesn’t feel distant and yet you long for more of Him.
- In time of difficulty and trial you feel secure in God’s love.
- You are spontaneous and free with God; there is nothing formal or mechanical about your approach to God.
- There is confidence in your relationship with God. (cf. Hebrews 4v16)
- You have real assurance within that you belong to the Father.

Mark Stibbe is a well known church leader and author. As a boy he was adopted, and he has poured such insight and experience in to his book “From Orphans to Heirs”. He tells of how his early discipleship as a Christian was somewhat legalistic; plenty of law and not enough grace. Gradually he began to get free of this, and God began to see him free from deep feelings of rejection from his childhood. One year after being ordained as an Anglican clergyman he recalls taking his switched-off youth group to a youth rally in Derby, but then found himself very embarrassed by the enthusiasm and the other young people who worshipped with radiant smiles on their faces and their hands in the air.

He writes: *"I remember thinking, "We are going to be out of here in a few minutes. Suddenly, the band struck up a song by Ishmael:*

*"Father God, I wonder
How I managed to exist
Without the knowledge of your parenthood
And your loving care.
But now I am your son
I am adopted in your family
And I can never be alone
'Cos, Father God, you're there beside me.
I will sing your praises,
For evermore."*

(Ishmael: Kingsway's Thank You Music. 1984)

There was something not only in the melody but also in the words that moved me at first. Having been abandoned as a baby at birth, I have always been particularly sensitive about being alone. The thought of the Father being always with us was hugely encouraging and heart warming. But what struck me most was the statement about being "adopted" in God's family. I had never before sung a hymn or a song in which that word appeared. As I sang out my praises to the Father for adopting me and making me his son, something was released inside me. I felt my knees turning to jelly and I sank to the ground in front of my rebellious youth group. I was in floods of tears and I couldn't do anything about it. Nor did I want to do anything about it. I knew what was happening to me was the work of the Holy Spirit and that it was about the healing of lifelong wounds.

From that moment on, God stepped out of the mist. (Like the father at the end of the film 'The Railway Children'!) He ceased to be a distant figure and began to be an intimate Father. In the process, I began to enter into a full certainty and joy of that spirit of adoption. I progressed from a spirituality based on fear to one based on love. For the first time, the cry went forth from my heart to God. "Oh! My Daddy! Oh! My Daddy!" In short, I fell in love with the Father. (Mark Stibbe. 'From Orphans to Heirs' - Celebrating our spiritual adoption. BRF. 1999)

"For God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves." (Ephesians 1v4-6)

God is your Father. The special intimacy God the Son shares with God the Father is now open to you and me once we are "in Christ". The Father loves us as sons and daughters. We can come to Him with this simple and childlike word, "Father".

John Wilthew January 2007

