

WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN

Text: Romans 8: 15-17
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If you want to get to know God better and get some more passion in your spirituality a great book to read is 'Knowing God' by J.I. Packer. Over a million copies have been sold. In that book Dr Packer says: 'If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.' Do you know yourself as the child of God, deeply loved by your Father?

This month our vicar Ben and I have focused on the issue of 'passionate spirituality'. In giving a definition of 'passionate spirituality' a couple of weeks ago we noted that '*... the Christian faith is not just an acceptance of biblical teaching, but involves a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and as our relationship with Jesus intensifies, so we become more passionate about our spirituality*'. Do you get what is being said? You can know the Bible, even know the Book of Forms and the church confessions back to front, and go to church often, but if you do not have a personal relationship with Jesus, you are missing out. If you follow a Christian lifestyle but do not know Jesus, no wonder your spirituality is flat. The teaching of the gospel is the wonder that Jesus rose from the dead. He is here with us now and personally brings us salvation and relates with us. As the old hymn puts it (St Patrick's Breastplate): *Christ beside me/ Christ before me/ Christ behind me, King of my heart. Christ within me/ Christ below me/ Christ above me, never to part*. For an authentic Christian spirituality Jesus must remain at the heart and soul of who we are: the one we seek, the one we long for and whom we serve.

But this poses a problem. If being a Christian is to have a relationship with Jesus what does that look like? We understand personal relationships like husband and wife, mother and child, friend to friend. We know what to do and how to behave in these relationships. We get them. But how do you relate to someone you can't see, hear or touch? How do we nurture a relationship with a majestic, holy, mysterious and totally beyond us God? The Bible gives us some clues by using picture language to help us understand. There are three images central to the New Testament: (1) the spiritual child of God (2) union with Christ (3) walking in the spirit. The first relationship is portrayed as one between a father and a child.

That is what we find here in our text in Romans 8. Looking at the context we see in verse 12 that Paul is saying to the Christians at Rome that they "*have an obligation*"; an obligation to live very differently to others, to behave in another way. They cannot go on opposed to God's way. As he puts it, they should not be "*living according to the sinful nature*", because that is the way of death. In other words eternal death, hell. Rather, with the Spirit of Christ in them (:13) they should "*put to death the misdeeds of the body*" so that they "*will live*", that is, live eternally. Now Paul is not saying this in the context of fear; 'behave, or go to hell!' It is in the context of hope. They are already children of God and as such the Holy Spirit will help them live differently. Note verse 14 "*you will live because those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God*". Now that is their reassurance, that is the basis of their hope; they are indeed God's own children. That is Paul's main thrust here. If they look only at their obligation and how they are supposed to obey God, and don't, they will continually doubt their eternal life. Rather than that they must grasp that "*by the spirit ...they are children of God*".

Now it is good that we as believers are painfully aware of our sin and failings. That is the first step in faith and it is good because it is a sign of our belonging to God, a test of our childhood. You see, an unbeliever could not care less about God or going against his ways. It is the work of the Holy Spirit that we are convicted of sin, that we know ourselves as slaves to the sinful human nature. It is the work of the Spirit that sets the fear of hell in us and that has us bow before the awesome and holy God. But the purpose for that is to draw us to Jesus, so that we see our need of him, that we embrace him in faith and by that are set free from our guilt.

That is what Paul is getting at in :15 "*For you did not receive a Spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption and by that we cry "Abba, Father."* It is the Spirit who leads us to see our sin and to fear God, but who then takes us beyond the fear. In Romans 5 Paul writes "*since we have been justified through faith we have peace with God ... and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God*". John writes in 1 John 4 "*There is no fear in love*". It is unfortunate that there are Christians who want to stress that we are sinners, slaves to sin and in dreadful fear of God. They want hellfire and damnation sermons. They seem to want us to grovel in fear before an angry God. Fear does not generate a passionate spirituality. Paul says to the effect 'No, we move beyond that. We have received the 'Spirit of sonship'. And by Him we cry "Abba, Father"'.

The word 'sonship' is legal language from the Roman law and means 'adoption'. It was common practice for a Roman nobleman, if he had no son, to adopt a son to carry on his family line. He might have been the son of a poorer noble family who needed the money, or he might have been a slave. Now, by Roman law, once the person was adopted all his past debt and previous status was removed. He no longer owed money and he was no longer a slave. He took on the status of the patrician, the Roman noble, and was his heir, with all the rights and privileges. That is what Paul is getting at when he says "*You have received the Spirit of adoption*". The fear is gone because we are no longer slaves under the law of God. The debt for our sin is gone. Our old status is gone. We are now God's own children.

Just how deep and tender that relationship is, is seen by what the Spirit leads us to cry out: "*Abba, Father*". This is not the language to a stern father who is strict, 'children should be seen and not heard', with no time for them. "Abba" (or "avva") is Aramaic. The Hebrew word for "father" is "av". "Avva" is the intimate term of a child as "Dad" or "Daddy" is to "Father". So picture the scene in Paul's days, in the house of a very important Roman official. Visitors seeking his attention would have done so with reserve and deference, even fear. In a stilted and respectful way they would have made their way to his office, bowing, always fearful of doing something the wrong way. But the child in the house runs up and cries 'Daddy, Daddy!' This is not to say he has no respect. The little boy is awed by his father. He respects his wisdom and strength. He loves him dearly and obeys him. But he is spontaneous and free because it is his own father. He is in his own home. Says Paul, in effect, to reassure his readers 'This is a sign

of your salvation, when you know God as Father'; when you are at home with 'Dad'. Note verse again verse 15 "*You did not receive a Spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship, and by him we cry 'Abba, father'.*" It is not by presumption we speak that way. We are not smart alecks trying to make ourselves equal to God. It is by the Spirit that we cry out "Abba, Father". This is God's will, that we know him that way. And God in us, the Holy Spirit, stirs our heart to cry out to God as our loving, doting Father.

Now notice something: "*Abba, father*" – that is a quote of the very words of Jesus in Mark 14:36. In Mark 14 we see Jesus struggling in the garden of Gethsemane. Before his death on the cross, he said, "*Abba, father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will but what you will.*" Here we see intimacy and reverence. Jesus as God's Son is fully God and fully free. He is intimate with his Father and yet he is obedient and reverend, even to death. It is by this obedience and reverence that we are set free. It is by Christ's death that we are forgiven and by his obedience that we are children of God ourselves. We are sisters and brothers to Jesus, with his blessings and privileges ours as well. So we are able to address God in the same way, "*Abba, father*". As Jesus cried out spontaneously, deeply from his heart, in his fear of hell, so we also cry out spontaneously from our fear and loneliness. We cry out to the Father, to the One we know is Lord and provider. Not one who is distant, but One who is so close and dear. One we know as Father, "ava".

This knowing, knowing for sure, knowing deeply that we are God's children is the work of the Spirit. Paul says in :16 "*The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children*". Notice, it is a subjective thing. Yes, we can read the Bible and objectively know about this. But the Spirit, through the Word, tells us deeply inside 'You are God's child. He loves you deeply'. It is like being in love. It is not something you can research. You just know it deep down. How does the Spirit witness to our spirit? Well, you read statements in the Bible about God's grace and it warms your heart and you know 'He loves me. Always.' Or you struggle with an issue and automatically you seek Father's help, because you are his child. That is natural for a child. Or you see the wonder of nature, which you enjoy, and you have a desire to thank Father: 'It's wonderful, awesome, God.' Or like a child feels secure and happy with dad, enjoying games and finding pleasure in being with him, so we long to enjoy God himself. We long to be in his presence and do nothing, just to be with him. As

the Westminster Catechism puts it, our chief purpose is to "*worship God and enjoy him forever*". Those desires, that spontaneity towards God is the work of the Spirit telling us 'You are God's child'.

Now, Paul is a marvelous teacher. He makes sure we understand all the implications by drawing them out. Note verse 17 "*Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*" The obvious conclusion from life's experience is that if we are children of someone then we are heirs to that person. Well, we are God's children and his heirs, sharing in his glory. So what is our inheritance of glory? Well, as Paul describes it in verses 18-25, that God will restore the creation. There will be a renewed earth, believers with renewed bodies living without sin, sickness or death. Because God is our Father we know this will be ours, because we are his heirs. There will be no rewriting of the will. Interestingly, the Spirit who testifies that we are God's children is himself the guarantee. In Ephesians 1:13 & 14 Paul writes "*...you were marked in [Christ] with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance*".

To reinforce this assurance Paul gives about believers being heirs of God, he says they are also "*co-heirs with Christ*". Now if Christ is our brother, then, of course we are heirs with him. But the implication here is that we are heirs only because we are "*in Christ*". You see, the devil wants us all to think that our inheritance is just a fairy tale: 'New earth, new bodies, life forever with God in our midst. Yeah. Sure.' And if we do hold to that belief then the devil will come again and suggest to us: 'You can't be an heir of God. Look at your lifestyle, you're a sinner, a failure. You don't live up to God's standards'. Then we are reminded that we are 'co-heirs'. It is Jesus who has done it all. He has paid for our failure and he shares all his blessings and benefits with us. It has never been that we are God's children by what we do. We do, we live, we love, because we are God's children. And we are God's children because of Jesus. In an age of broken homes, where so many long just to be loved and feel a place called home, in an age where we are driven to stand on our own, to succeed, a passionate spirituality calls us to be a child, trusting Father, obedient to his ways, basking in the knowledge that we are loved, we belong, we have an inheritance that gives hope and meaning beyond our wildest dreams. Do you want some passion in your spirituality? It begins by recognizing who we are in Jesus. Through faith you are the deeply loved

child of the Almighty. Can you realize that and feel bored in church, and ho hum this sermon? Isn't there rather a deep sense of joy and a desire to praise: Thank you Jesus! We love you father God!