

ROM 8.9-17: LIVING AS CHILDREN OF GOD

[Chelmsford 29 April 2012]

1. FINDING FATHER

Not to believe in God is utter foolishness.

It doesn't take faith to believe in a creator God who made heaven and earth.

We only have to open our eyes and reflect on what we see to realise that this world did not come into being by accident.

The very complexity of the human body is proof of design, and so in turn evidence of a creator

1. Take the human ear: whereas a grand piano has 240 strings by which a gifted musician can produce beautiful sounds, the tiny human ear has the equivalent of 24,000 strings, enabling us to listen to the full range of the human voice as also to appreciate the beauty of the sound made by musical instruments
2. Take the human eye: whereas I am told that a TV camera has 60,000 photo-electric elements enabling it to 'see', the human eye – which focuses automatically, sees in all weathers & normally functions for 70+ years – contains more than 137,000 elements.

To people with eyes to see, the very complexity of our make-up is a pointer to the existence of God.

It has been rightly said that the probability of life originating from an accident is comparable to the probability of the Unabridged *Oxford English Dictionary* resulting from an explosion in a printing factory.

Things don't just happen. There must be some mind or intelligent force behind it all.

It doesn't take faith to believe in the existence of God. God is self-evident.

BUT to believe in God as Father is another matter.

Indeed, it could be argued that to believe in God as Father is lunacy.

Just think for a moment of the implications.

The power behind the universe – the God who made the human body in all its intricate complexity – the God who stands behind the solar system in its unimaginable vastness.... the thought of addressing such a God as Father blows the mind.

Yes, it takes faith to believe that.

And yet, Christians not only believe in God as Father; they claim to have actually experienced him as Father.

For at its centre Christianity is not about believing in God, it is about knowing God.

And there is all the difference in the world between those two things.

Ask the average passer-by if they're a Christian, and more often or not they will reply: "*But of course I am – I believe in God*".

But the essence of the Christian faith is not believing in God – many other religions believe in God.

The essence of the Christian faith is entering into a relationship and finding God as Father.

Some years ago there was a best-seller written by a former Muslim about her experience of Christianity: the title of the book was *I dared to call him Father*. This sums up the wonder of the Christian faith.

It is to this miracle that Paul refers in Rom 8.15,16: “**The Spirit that God has given you does not make you slaves and cause you to be afraid; instead the Spirit makes you God’s children, and by the Spirit’s power we cry out to God, ‘Father, my dear Father’**”

2. DARING TO CALL GOD ‘FATHER, DEAR FATHER’

Literally Paul wrote in Rom 8.16: “**By the Spirit’s power we cry out to God ‘Abba, Father!’**”

Abba in this context is not a word for a pop musician

It is the Aramaic word for “Father”.

According to the Talmud (a collection of sayings from the Jewish rabbis), “*When a child experiences the taste of wheat [i.e. when it has begun to take solid foods] it learns to say ‘Abba’ and ‘Imma’*”. *Abba & Imma* are baby words for Daddy & Mummy.

Significantly, these baby words were not abandoned when children grew up. In Jesus’ time grow-up children with families of their own still addressed their fathers as ‘*Abba*’.

It was this word that Jesus used of God.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, for instance, he prayed: “**Abba Father** [GNB: Father, my Father]! **All things are possible for you. Take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want**” (Mark 14.36).

Very often we emphasise the end of the prayer: “**not what I want, but what you want**” – what a prayer! But the revolutionary aspect of this prayer is found at the beginning.

For Jesus dared to call God ‘**Abba Father**’.

It was so revolutionary that even in the Greek NT the Aramaic original was retained – no one had ever dared to address God in this way.

Why, in order to avoid profaning the name of God, the devout Jews of Jesus’ time spoke of the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ rather than the ‘Kingdom of God’.

But Jesus dared to address God as *Abba Father*.

There was only one occasion when Jesus addressed God as anything other than Father.

That occasion was on the Cross: “**My God, my God, why did you abandon me?**” (Mark 15.35). There for one great agonizing moment Jesus experienced separation from God,

But, that occasion apart, Jesus enjoyed an intensely personal relationship with God.

He knew God as his Father – ‘*Abba, Father*’ he prayed.

Amazingly we too are invited to have that kind of relationship with God.

We too are invited to address him as ‘*Abba, Father*’

So Paul writes: “**By the Spirit’s power we cry out to God, ‘Abba Father’**” (Rom 8.15)

3. BECOMING GOD'S SONS AND DAUGHTERS

Notice – it is “**by the Spirit’s power**” that “**we cry out to God, ‘Abba Father’**”

The work of the Spirit is to make God real to us.

In the 19th century people used to talk of ‘*the fatherhood of God, & the brotherhood of man*’. But by and large this is not a Biblical emphasis.

True God is the Father of us all in the sense that he is the Creator of all, but he is not the Father of all in this more intimate sense.

We can only call God Father because he has redeemed/saved us.

This comes out very clearly in a parallel passage in Galatians 4.4-6: “**But when the right time finally came, God sent his own Son. He came as the son of a human mother and lived under the Jewish Law, to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might become God’s sons and daughters. To show that you are his sons and daughters, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who cries out ‘Father, my Father’.**”

None of us are naturally children of God. God has only one natural Son – Jesus.

Jesus alone is the Son of God by right – only he from eternity has been able to call God ‘Abba Father’.

But God sent his Son that “**we might become God’s sons and daughters**”

There on the Cross God in his grace removed the barrier of sin, and now invites us to become his children.

The good news is that when by faith we believe that there on the Cross God in Christ has done away with our sin, then and there we become part of the family of God.

God becomes real in our hearts – by the work of the Holy Spirit.

In the words of Paul here in Rom 8.15: “**The Spirit makes you God’s children and by the Spirit’s power we cry out to God, ‘Father, my Father’.**”

Although it is not clear in the GNB, Paul uses both in Gal 4 as also in Rom 8 the metaphor of ‘adoption’. Thus the NRSV translates: “*You have received a spirit of adoption*”.

This metaphor is significant, for within the context of Roman law adoption carried with it two key consequences:

1. In the eyes of Roman law, an adopted son or daughter was regarded as a totally new person. The previous life of the child concerned was regarded as totally: any debts which had been incurred on their behalf were cancelled. The newly adopted person was deemed to have entered upon a new life.
Needless to say, the metaphor of adoption was well-suited to describe what happens when the Spirit makes us God’s children – our past is cancelled, our sins are wiped away. As Paul writes to the church in Corinth: “**Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come**” (2 Cor 5.17)
2. In the eyes of Roman law an adopted son or daughter was regarded as literally being their new father’s son or daughter. As a result an adopted son or daughter was not allowed to marry the other children in the family, even if they were not blood relations.

Here we find another parallel to the Christian faith: when by faith we are born again, we really do become children of God. This is not just a figure of speech. We really do become heirs of the kingdom. As Paul says in Rom 8.17: **“Since we are his children, we will possess the blessings he keeps for his people.... we will share his glory”**

How do we know that this is true? Because, says Paul in Rom 8.15, 16, it is **“by the Spirit’s power”** that **“we cry out to God, ‘Father, my Father’. God’s Spirit joins himself to our spirits to declare that we are God’s children”**; literally, **“it is the very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God”** (NRSV).

Almost certainly Paul is alluding to the Roman adoption ceremony which was carried out in the presence of seven witnesses. These witnesses were there to ensure that if there were ever a dispute relating to inheritance matters, they could step forward and swear that the adoption was valid and genuine. The Spirit, says Paul, confirms within our hearts the validity of our adoption. We are indeed sons and daughters of God. Wow!

4 LIVING AS CHILDREN OF GOD

As God’s sons and daughters we are called to live like the children of the living God. Listen to Paul again in Rom 8.15: **“The Spirit that God has given you does not make you slaves and cause you to be afraid; instead the Spirit makes you God’s children...”**

The implication is that if we have become children of God, then we should be confident of our new status. In the words of Tom Smal: *“The Devil, the accuser, when he cannot trap us with wine, women and song, lives up to his names, goes all religious, throws our sins and failings in our faces, as though they had never been forgiven by Christ”*.

But we have been born again into his family – we have made a completely new beginning – we can therefore live as the free and forgiven children of God.

In an insecure world, we can be the securest of people – secure in God’s love, secure for today, secure for ever.

What a difference the Spirit makes to our lives!

We should also live lives which befit our new status.

We should allow God’s Spirit to direct and control our lives

So Paul writes in Rom 8.12, 14: **“So then, my brothers and sisters, we have an obligation, but it is not to live as our human nature wants us to. For if you live according to your human nature, you are going to die; but if by the Spirit you put to death your sinful actions, you will live”**.

Paul at this point does not give any examples of what it means to live a Spirit-controlled life: it is only in Romans 12 that Paul begins to depict the ethical dimensions of the Christian faith, with its obligation to love one another.

There he writes: **“If you love someone, you will never do them wrong; to love, then, is to obey the whole law”** (Rom 13.10).

But to return to Romans 8: Paul here speaks of us as being sons and daughters of God. As a result of the Spirit’s work in our hearts, we have become part of the family of God.

So let us live together as members of the family of God – showing love to one another.

In the words one commentator: *“To compare the Christian community to a family means one must bring the same expectations, love and patience to fellow Christians in the church that one should also bring to members of one’s own family. Attitudes that destroy a family – uncaring disregard on the part of one spouse toward another, selfish ignoring of the needs of children by parents or of parents by children, preoccupation with one’s own interests at the expense of consideration of others in the family – will also destroy a church”* (Paul Achtemeier)

But, of course, we cannot allow the Spirit just to influence the way in which we live together in the church – the Spirit must also influence the way in which we live our lives in the world. The essence of the Spirit controlled life is that, wherever we are, we no longer live for self – rather we live for others, whoever they may be.

So Paul writes: **“You do not live as your human nature tells you to; instead you live as the Spirit tells you to – if in fact, God’s Spirit lives in you”** (Rom 8.9).

It is not enough to rejoice in the presence of God’s Spirit in our lives.

Rather we are called to live lives directed by God’s Spirit – lives that reflect that the love and generosity of God himself.

In summary then, what have we learnt from this section of Paul’s letter to the church at Rome?

1. In the first place we learn that we may dare to call God Father.
It was discovering this which actually caused me to become a Christian
I had grown up in a Christian home and knew all about Jesus
But then one Sunday evening I heard a sermon on opening words of the Lord’s Prayer, **‘Our Father’**, and suddenly realised I had been missing out on experiencing God as Father
On my return home I knelt down, and opened the door of my heart to the Lord Jesus, and in so doing entered into a new relationship with God as my Father.
I wonder, is that the experience of everyone here this morning? If not, then let me urge you this morning to move from knowing about God, to knowing God.
2. In the second place, we learn that the broker of this new relationship is the Holy Spirit.
The work of the Holy Spirit us to make God real to us.
It is **by the Spirit’s power that we cry out to God Abba Father**.
When we put our trust in the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit is the catalyst whereby we become children of God
3. Thirdly, we learn that we need to allow God’s Spirit to direct and control our lives
“Live as the Spirit tells you to”, says Paul.
Here then is a challenge to those of us who have entrusted our lives to Jesus.
Paul says to you and to me: ‘Don’t block the work of the Spirit. Live lives that befit the children of God!’

