

Sunday 19th June 2022 – 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13 – ‘Meet the parents’

Meeting the in-laws for the first time is usually a scary experience for most of us. Every family has its own habits and customs: things which you take for granted seem strange to others. And then there's the nagging question – will my partner's parents think I'm good enough for their child? Will they even like me? What if I make a terrible faux pas, or embarrass myself in some way?

The panic we feel at times like this was the inspiration for the 2000 film 'Meet the Parents'. It's one of our favourite films, so much so that we used to show various clips in the Marriage Preparation course we used to run for our wedding couples. In the film, Ben Stiller meets his girlfriend Teri Polo's parents for the first time. Teri's dad is played by Robert De Niro, a retired CIA agent, and absolutely terrifying. As you can imagine, the genius of the film is the disconnect between the semi-hippy liberal Stiller and the military hardman De Niro.

Although the film is very funny and has you squirming in your seat numerous times, it also raises some interesting questions about the nature of parenting. It showcases two extreme stereotypes of the role of parent: the anything-goes-'let your precious darling find their own way in life' contrasted with old-fashioned discipline, respect and very firm boundaries.

Those of us who've been parents know that it's an impossible job. There is no such thing as a perfect human parent, most of the time you're making up as you go along and hoping for the best. The fact of our natural selfishness also means that not only will we always have flaws as a parent, but, however good our parenting, *our kids* will have flaws too. That's human nature.

Today is Father's Day, a day which raises a huge variety of emotions. Some will be celebrating great dads, others will be reminded of pain, either emotional or literal. A few will have had abusive fathers or just absent ones. Wherever you are on that spectrum, it reminds us how mixed our experiences of parenthood are.

But the nature of parenthood is one we can't avoid when it comes to our faith. As we saw last week, the very first thing we learned about God in this very early letter of the New Testament is that Christians had learned to call God 'Father'. This was the radical new understanding of our relationship to God which Jesus had shown his followers, and was now being absorbed into the early church. God was still majestic, awesome and glorious. He was still king of kings and the judge of the world – but **God was also close, intimate, someone we can relate to as a parent**.

We often take this for granted now – the words of the Lord's Prayer are embedded so deep in our memories that we almost take it for granted that we can address the Almighty Lord of Creation as 'Our Father'. And, whatever the failings of our own fathers, we can look to God as the ideal pattern for a perfect parent – a combination of unconditional love, patience and forgiveness, of wisdom when need it, protection too, but also willingness to give us freedom and to risk our rejection of him for the sake of love. If we all fall short of this model – and we do – the journey of our spiritual lives is, at least in part, learning to find in God everything we need in a parent. This may not heal all the wounds of our own earthly parental relationships, but it helps us to put those deficiencies into a bigger perspective.

It also follows that **the pattern of God's relationship with us seeps naturally into the pattern of relationships we find in church life**, especially between the church community and its leaders. Just as St Paul elsewhere says, 'follow my example, as I follow Jesus' example', so he also models his pastoral oversight on the pattern of his divine parent in heaven.

It is notable in our passage for today that **he uses both maternal and paternal examples to describe his relationship to the young church in Thessalonica** – so in verses 7-8: 'Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our whole lives as well.' And then, a few verses later in v11: 'For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.'

The important thing here is not whether Paul attaches any gender-specific meaning to these images; the bigger point is that he sees his role with this young group of believers in the terms of a loving parent – someone who loves and cares for them, encourages and comforts them, shares everything with them. The fact that he also refers to this relationship in terms of other familial images – calling them brothers and sisters at the start, and even referring to his leadership as being 'like young children among you' in v7 means that we shouldn't formalise what Paul is saying into an overly prescriptive leadership model. Just as other images for God include shepherd and servant, so Christian leadership has room for other ways of seeing how leaders relate to church communities.

That said, the image of parental care is a powerful one, and one adopted by the church from early times. It's no accident that we refer to the early church 'mothers and fathers'. Similarly, some of you call me 'Father Matt' – others of you call me Pastor Matt, or Reverend Matt, or just Matt – or other less complimentary things! And all of those are absolutely fine with me, because they all appear in the bible as ways of understanding our church leaders.

Ultimately, healthy churches need leaders who try to pattern their leadership on the humble service exemplified by Jesus. When that happens, what we see is what St Paul sees in this letter: people flourish, the message is received with joy and lives are empowered for fruitful service, even when times are tough.

So as I wrap up: perhaps some of you need to hear the reminder today that God is the parent you always wished you had; or indeed that you did have, but who isn't here anymore. Let God be that parent to you, that in his unconditional love and care you might find all that you need to thrive and grow. Perhaps for others, the nudge is to pray more for the church's leaders. I certainly need all the prayer I can get – but there are many others, too, and we all need grace day-by-day to imitate Christ's example, and offer parental love and care to all whom we serve.

And may God grant us all grace to flourish under the loving care of our divine and human parents. Amen.