

July 23, 2017 Romans 8: 12-25, Mt 13: 24-30, 36-43, Psalm 139

Joint Heirs with Christ

We are adopted as sons and daughters of God as Jesus was, so we can expect that hope will grow within us as we look to the future.

The May *Observer* tells an amazing story of adoption written by Sara Jewell, who introduces us to her younger sister, Araminta Montague and her husband Jason, now living in Atlanta, who have adopted four children, all of whom have special needs, who are welcomed and loved as much as their three natural born children. All of the children were adopted internationally— Mimi and Mei Ting are from China while Natan and Lovie are from Ethiopia. Destined to lives of suffering and neglect in orphanages in their home countries, this family have challenged so many of us to expand what we may know about acceptance, compassion and belonging as children from different parts of the world are united under one roof and into one home. Despite all the challenges, which are many, Sara Jewell reports that their home is full of joy, love and hope.

Their story lifts for us in a very real way how the metaphor of adoption, the way of becoming part of a loving community, models the relationship that God has with us. Paul speaks of how we are adopted as children of God just as Jesus was adopted as God's son. According to the gospels, Jesus himself experienced his relationship with God in a very intimate way, as that of a child with their parent. When he prayed, he called God Abba, using the Aramaic word for Daddy.

In the bible, we find two major images of God, one, monarchical and the other, familial. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is most often imaged as "King" whereas in the New Testament "Father" is dominant. The New Testament was written in Greek; so the word used for father is "pater. Although Jesus probably knew some Greek, we can assume that he taught the common people in Galilee in Aramic and in his own life of prayer with God

was in Aramaic so the word he used then was “Abba” and he taught his disciples to address God in that way.

John Cobb, who is a well known Protestant theologian and a global leader of process theology, has written a spiritual autobiography in the later years of his life trying to encourage the church and individuals to reclaim this relationship and image of God as Abba. In his book is called, *Jesus’ Abba, the God Who Has Not Failed*, he speaks most passionately about how our world needs to understand and welcome again this metaphor for God as Daddy, not exclusively of course, but to help rekindle in us that sense of close companionship and unconditional love which Cobb himself felt throughout most of his life, even sometimes in spite of a long career as an academic in the field of philosophy and theology.

It is an image that Paul also lifts up, both in our text today from Romans:

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry “Abba! Father!”. It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God....

And again in Galatians 4: 4-7 God is also described as “Abba” by Paul.

“When the time had come God sent forth his Son.... To redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying “ABBA”. So through God you are no longer a slave but a son.”

Of course through the course of history and a deeper appreciation of our human diversity, these words have been expanded to include daughters, women as adopted heirs and have inspired important social movements, for instance the abolition of slavery and now the fuller acknowledgement of the rights and dignity of the Aboriginal peoples throughout the world.

So if we accept that we have all been adopted as sons and daughters of God, the next step is to affirm that we are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ (Rom 8: 17).

I have been reflecting a lot these past few months on what it means to be an heir. As you know my own Father (Dad, I called him) died in 1974 when I was 21. But he left us, his children the legacy of some real estate in Kingston, several apartment buildings which he built in the 1960's. Since my brother Rob was the property manager of the buildings for several decades and is now focusing his energy on taking biweekly chemo treatments, the buildings have been gradually been sold off so that the family estate can be finalized. The past year has been spent organizing family wills, changing trustees, meeting with accountants and lawyers. It has indeed been and continues to be a very emotional journey where all the complexities of family dynamics have come into play.

I can't express enough my gratitude for the legacy that my father has left his four children and their spouses, and it has brought our family closer together as we remember stories of his life, the values and qualities that motivated him, more than just a desire for success as a business man, but appreciating his loyalty and concern for his whole family, his love for science, for engineering, the valuing of education, the beautiful home on the St Lawrence River which he built and which continues to be a place of beauty, renewal and wonderful hospitality at the hands of my 93 year old mother.

Hopefully many of you will have an opportunity to attend family reunions, visit with far flung family and old friends in these summer days when travelling is easier, maybe delve into old books or files or pictures that need to be sorted, let go of, or bequeathed to another. In the more relaxed pace of summer when days are longer and night air is sweeter, we should be able to attend to that place in our hearts and spirits where we re-discover who we are, who we belong to, what has shaped us and what feeds our souls.

This is kind of what Paul is talking about when he invites us to live by the Spirit rather than by the flesh – the flesh referring not literally to our bodies, but our selfish impulses that drive us, sometimes into destructive ways of living. We are called to attend to our Spirit self, to reconnect with the wisdom and life of Christ that lies deep within us, that centres us throughout our entire lives. The psalmist in 139 experiences that there is nowhere that he can go that God’s Spirit, God’s presence is not already there.

To find Christ however, as Paul discerns, is often through finding where we are suffering, where we are groaning within, “and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ- if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him”.

Rom 8:17

This is not the part of being an heir that we often contemplate, especially as we live in a society that is committed to diminishing and denying that we should suffer anything at all. The suffering Paul refers to here is not so much that suffering we know in a bodily way, such as head and body aches, the side effects of chemo, gnawing anxiety, loneliness, the weight of debt.....but rather Paul is speaking to the suffering we experience as we live our lives as committed Christians, as we become more sensitive to the pain of others, injustices in our society, the compassion we feel for those who are hopeless or caught in the midst of conflict, unrelenting poverty, or overwhelmed by natural disasters.

In these more relaxing summer days, when our agendas are hopefully lighter, it should also give us the time to listen to where there is groaning in our own hearts, to listen to the groans of others, to listen more keenly to where nature herself is groaning, especially as a result of our own greed and neglect.

So what is it that makes you groan, to cry out “Abba! Father!” to groan with the whole creation. Paul uses that powerful image of the woman in labour, crying out in pain and

suffering. In those first few hours after Winnie was born and I visited an exhausted looking daughter in the hospital, Jessica looked at me with tired eyes, overwhelmed by the pain, the energy, the whole journey of labour – “I never knew how much work this would require”. I acknowledged that this is what it takes to bring life into the world – and suffering is part of it.

The wisdom of those who provide prenatal teaching would often use the phrase “pain with a purpose” as a helpful mantra for a woman who faced into labour and for the loved one that supported them. Now I know lots of women will have other, perhaps more colourful terms to describe that pain, but for me it is a phrase that helps me spiritually as well when I consider what it is to live the Christian life, to continue to be committed to Christ, to living in the way of Jesus, to be continually opened up to the suffering and injustices of life, to continually long for there to be healing, salvation and even redemption.

It takes enormous patience to remain committed to this life and to this experiment in living by the Spirit, to keep dying to old habits and old ways of thinking, to being open to the wisdom of Christ Jesus and the emerging ways of the Spirit. But hope is central to our faith – a cross- the death of Jesus whom we love who even on the cross cried out his sense of abandonment “Abba, Father”.

After the silence though, death was followed by the resurrection, and his Spirit continues to motivate, heal and energize us still to this day. It is this resurrecting, powerful spirit of hope and compassion and unfailing love that leads us, that frees us, that is Christ within, to which we are full heirs. God wants nothing less for each one of us than abundant and joy filled lives that is unafraid to look into the future with all of us possibilities, sorrows and new discoveries.

This is the family life of hope that we are heir to where all are welcome to be sons and daughters of Abba, the living God.