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Becoming Children of God

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Straight after Christmas Day, the Sunday gospel reading set by the lectionary was the story from Luke about the child Jesus, aged 12, going missing in Jerusalem after the Passover festival. Eventually, after 3 days' search, Mary and Joseph find him in the Temple – with Jesus, surprised they hadn't known where he was, insisting that he must be in his Father's house. Understandably this created some consternation for his human parents, and pointed up the tension between Jesus as an 'obedient' child in a human family while also being primarily responsive to his 'heavenly father', to God.

This week, the lectionary readings continue to circle around themes of childhood and the 'fatherhood' or 'parenthood' of God – but this time, it's not Jesus' human childhood that's the focus. Rather, it's the idea that he enables us to become children of God in a new way.

What does it mean to say that we are 'children of God'? At one level, it's a metaphor of relationship and dependency. In the reading from Jeremiah (31.7-14), for example, as in many Old Testament texts, God is said to 'have become a father to Israel'. Here God's fatherhood seems to mean that God is both the source of Israel's life, and its protector and sustainer. In this passage, God is also imaged as 'shepherd of the flock'; he's like the head of a large household, who will gather his scattered children together. These are metaphors for God that speak of care, provision, protection, and belonging – God acting like a middle-eastern patriarch. This is comforting and encouraging; but potentially it's also a little infantilising. One of the criticisms some people have of religion is that it's simply a projection of our need for a 'father-figure', a protector, someone who will save us from the suffering of the world ... On this account, the idea of God as 'father' and ourselves as children

signifies human immaturity – it gets in the way of us growing up, taking responsibility for our own lives and the life of the world.

The New Testament readings also use the imagery of God as parent and ourselves as God's children, but here I want to suggest that something a bit more subtle is going on. An important difference from the Jeremiah reading is that in the passages from Ephesians (1.3-14) and John's gospel (1.10-18), the possibility of our becoming children of God is said to be something that Jesus has made possible. This suggests it's not exactly the same idea as had been spoken about in the Hebrew scriptures – it's not just some generic idea of God as everyone's father.

Says John: 'But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God' (1.12). And the letter to the Ephesians says: 'God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved' (3.5).

So what does Jesus have to do with it? How is he necessary to God 'adopting' us as children?

I think to answer this question, we need to have a look at how Jesus is God's child, how he is the 'Son of the Father'. Because according to the New Testament, Jesus is 'Son of God' in a unique way. And the uniqueness of his 'sonship' can be summed up by saying that he is not just sourced in God, but that he is perfectly open to and continuously receptive of divine life. He is wholly turned to God; and who he is, is wholly given by, dependent on God. So much so, that he is God's presence and act in the world. He is differentiated from God. And yet, in him (says Rowan Williams) there is 'full and uninterrupted alignment of life and effect' with the love and intelligence that is God.¹ 'He is the image of the invisible God' (Col.1.13). 'No one has ever seen God', says John. 'It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known' (John 1.18).

¹ Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p.80.

Left to our own devices, we are not sons and daughters of God in this sense – we are not perfectly receptive to the divine life; we’re not wholly turned to the source of our Life and there is not full and uninterrupted alignment of our being with the love and intelligence that is God. And this means that we cannot receive all the love that God wishes to give us, and we cannot communicate this love to one another. We are, at some level, in our own way and in God’s way; we’re walled in on ourselves, often in rivalry or threatened by each other, and fearful of God.

What Jesus does for us is enable us to begin letting down our walls. He helps us to trust God enough to let our defences go a bit and let God in, so that we begin to become receptive to God’s love and life as he was. And this is how we become children of God as Jesus was a child of God. Only as this happens may we learn to be in the same relationship with God as he enjoyed and so pray as he did – completely open and undefended – ‘Abba, Father’.

So when the New Testament speaks of our becoming children of God, this isn’t just a nice comforting sentiment; it’s not general metaphor for dependency and powerlessness, and it’s certainly not infantilising – a projection of God as the ‘daddy’ who will make everything OK. It’s actually a much more radical, generous and costly receptivity to the presence and power of God. It’s about becoming ‘full of grace and truth’, as John says; it’s about ‘obtaining an inheritance’, as Ephesians puts it, fulfilling our destiny. To become children of God in this sense is nothing other than to become fully human, fully mature, fully realised as Jesus was. In him, we see how this way of being human, this filial relationship with God, shows up in human life – as courage, freedom, compassion and mercy.

And in the life of someone like Desmond Tutu, we see what being ‘adopted’ into this same relationship can do for each of us. For this is how it becomes possible for us to relate to each other without rivalry or threatened-ness, but truly as sisters and brothers, children of the one Father – bearers of the Father’s justice, love and peace.