

“PARENTING IN PROVERBS”

Proverbs 22:6

I suppose in some ways, we really ought to be talking to Luke this morning – but my guess is, he wouldn't really be listening. So rather than burden him with the responsibility of listening to and acting upon what we have to say today, we'll burden Mark and Bev instead. But not just them – all those who are (or who might be) parents, and those who try to support and pray for them – this is for all of you, all of us. We'll have a look at what the Bible has to say about being a parent, drawing particularly on some words from the Old Testament book of *Proverbs*, from which we read a bit earlier in the service.

Now, let's say right at the start that parenting not an easy subject and there are bound to be disagreements. No-one ever really does it the way we think it should be done. It is also something that leaves me very vulnerable. As my former colleague used to say - rather injudiciously, I always felt - "*This morning I want to expose myself to you*". The things that I say from here will - alas! - not always be seen to be the case in my own situation. I hope you'll forgive me for that. We are learning together here. But families are integral to our human way of life: the relational networks that come about as a result of our biological interaction seem to be fundamental to our existence. The great anthropologist, Margaret Mead, once wrote, "*No matter how many communes anybody invents, the family always creeps back.*" It's there: we cannot escape it, however much we might want to. It seems as if God is pretty keen on the idea, too, not only from the many examples we have throughout the Bible of family life (much of it extraordinarily dysfunctional!), but also from verses like *Psalms 68:6* - "*God sets the lonely in families*".

So it is very important that we take seriously the subject of family relationships, in its widest possible meaning, not just in the marketing and promotional unit of the nuclear family. And it is important too that we are honest about it. I don't know anyone who has the perfect family. There's an old Chinese proverb (isn't there always?) which says, "*Nobody's family can hang out the sign 'Nothing's the matter here'*". Let's not begin from a position of guilt and shame that our family isn't all it should be. Look at the families of the Bible - is there any one which is perfect? Even Jesus' family had their problems - his mother and brothers thought he was mad at one point. And it certainly wasn't what you might call a "model family"!

Having made those caveats and covered many of the bases, let's focus this morning on this particular subject of parenting, a rather horrible word following that ghastly American vogue for using nouns as verbs, but it's the best shorthand really for being, behaving, struggling, suffering and triumphing as a parent. And it's a minefield, isn't it? Even those of you here who are not parents yourselves have had a parent. And for those of you who are hoping to become parents within the next few months, I hope this doesn't put you off!

Back in 1991, as part of a series of articles in *The Guardian*, later published as a pamphlet entitled *The Parent Trap*, Richard Whitfield of the National Family Trust wrote: "*There's a huge crisis in parenting. There's less support for parents now than at any time in the last 30 years.*" And despite our protestations to the contrary, I believe that's as true in the church as it is in the wider community. To be a parent means to try and give a child a proper start in life, to educate, train and encourage a child in the ways you want him or her to adopt as he or she grows up. In the reading we had a few moments ago from *Proverbs 22*, we read "*Train [or start] a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.*" Giving a child a proper start in life - but what does it mean? How do we do it?

Well, let's start by recognising that there is no tick-list of things to do in a certain order and at certain times. Despite what certain people may try to tell you at seminars and in Christian paperbacks and glossy magazines, I do not believe that you can just buy into a foolproof scheme for ensuring that your child grows up to be the most wonderful human being who has ever lived, with impeccable table manners, the ability to collect A-levels like conkers in autumn, polite conversation and a huge vocabulary, and an overwhelming burden to found a missionary society. It's plain hokum and you need to beware of taking

too seriously those whose ideas of child-rearing owe more to the mechanistic secular psychologies on offer in the wider world than they do to any understanding of the Bible and of our God-given individuality. That way lies guilt and anguish because you will always be saying to yourself, "I followed all the rules and it has still gone wrong. Why am I such a failure?"

And we need to remember, too, that the Bible itself is not a checklist of do's and don'ts. There are all kinds of examples of families which just don't operate according to what we might think of as the norms of family life. Look at Hannah, who gave Samuel away as soon as he was old enough to walk: at David, who ended up fighting a war against one of his sons: at the mother of James and John who allowed ambition to cloud her understanding of what it was all about. And when it comes to the exhortations of the Bible, while you might find some room for manoeuvre in a loose interpretation of *Proverbs 23:13,14*, what on earth are you going to do about such passages as *Deuteronomy 21:18ff*? If we felt that was the way forward you wouldn't be able to get down the Birmingham Road for the pile of corpses!

So let me make some tentative suggestions this morning about parenting which, while you may not agree with all that is said, I believe have at least some Biblical support. As always, the sermon should be on the church website by the time you get home, so those of you with the appropriate facility can download it and fume over it all for the rest of the week.

1. PARENTING IS DIFFICULT

This point needs to be made right at the outset because it can sometimes appear, when you look at other people and their wonderful children, and when you read those "easy-when-you-know-how" paperbacks, that bringing up children is as easy as anything. We get quite a few of those wonderful letters at Christmas, which people type and photocopy in enormous quantities to send out to acquaintances of theirs whom they are convinced actually give a monkey's about every detail of their lives during the past year. And their children are all the most wonderful beings in the known universe, mainly due to their own unstinting efforts to buy them private tutoring, send them to summer schools in everything you can imagine and pray for them whenever their heads are not filled with questions about what wonderful holiday experience they can provide for them next year. Listen to this from Erma Bombeck, an American humorist (*Oxford Book of Humorous Prose pp897,8*).

Everyone said Sharon was a terrific mother.

Her neighbours said it.

She painted the inside of her garbage cans with enamel, grew her own vegetables, cut her own grass every week, made winter coats for the entire family from remnants, donated blood and made Barbara a doll cake for her birthday.

Her mother said it.

Sharon ... colour co-ordinated the children's clothes and put them in labelled drawers, laundered aluminium foil and used it again ... cut everyone's hair and knew her health insurance number off by heart.

Her children's teacher said it.

She helped her children every night with their homework, did her son's paper round when it rained, packed nutritious lunches with little raised faces on the sandwiches ... belonged to five car pools and once blew up 234 balloons by herself for the school fete.

Her husband said it.

Sharon washed the car when it rained ... put the children on their backs at night to make sure they didn't sleep on their faces ...

Her best friend said it.

She built a bed out of scraps left over from the patio, crocheted a Santa Claus to cover the extra roll of toilet paper at Christmas time, washed fruit before her children ate it, learned to play the harpsichord ... and when the group ate out always figured out who owed what.

Her minister said it.

Sharon found time to read all the dirty books and campaign against them. She played guitar at evening services. She corresponded with a poor family in Guatemala .. in Spanish.

Sharon was one of those mothers blessed with the knack of being organised. She planned a theme party for the dog's birthday and her knots came out just right on the shoelaces when they broke.

She put a basketball hoop over the clothes basket as an incentive for good habits, started seedlings in a toilet roll, and insulated the house with empty egg boxes which everyone else threw away.

Sharon was a super mum.

Her gynaecologist said it.

Her butcher said it.

Her tennis partner said it.

Her children ...

Her children never said it.

They spent a lot of time with Rick's mother, who was always home and who ate biscuits straight out of the packet and who played poker with them.

(Motherhood - The Second Oldest Profession)

Parenting is not easy. There are hard choices to be made, difficult decisions to be faced, emotional difficulties to be overcome. All children are different so you can't count on what someone else has done with their kids to work with yours - you can't even count on what you've done with one of your own to work with another of your own. There are pressures on all sides - from the children themselves and the perceptions they have about what you are doing; from grandparents (and how!); from the world around as it invades your family through media and advertising; from the church, where certain standards are expected of Christian children (often completely arbitrarily); from the constraints of finance and so on. It is not easy - and we don't get it right - so let's recognise that and not begin from a position of grovelling on the floor, racked with guilt and fearful that others are looking on us with disdain and disgust.

One other thing, very briefly here. It's difficult to bring children up, and it can be very difficult to let them go - when they set off for college or university, when they leave home for a job somewhere else, when they get married. It may be some way off for little Luke, but don't forget that children grow up and become adults. You can still love them and show you care for them - but realise that when they're thirty they have enough experience to know when to get their hair cut, and ear-rings are not specifically forbidden in the Bible, and if they're not in when you 'phone it doesn't mean they're out pushing drugs or falling under a tube train!

2. PARENTING IS VITAL

More blindingly obvious advice! Without the help of parents a child is helpless. Remember how Jesus talked about Jerusalem, saying that he longed to be like a mother hen to the people because they were all at sea, desolate and directionless. We may disagree with the emphasis on the "rod" in *Proverbs 13:24* and *28:13*, but the clear principle is that there is a need for discipline and boundaries. You cannot just let a child make up his own mind about whether to do things. There is a need for him to know the limits that are acceptable as far as behaviour goes. If you go along to PC World and buy a computer, you don't expect to open it and find a note that says, "*Just fiddle around with it until it does what you want it to. All the bits and pieces are there, but you're an individual and we want you to get the best out of it for yourself.*" It would be preposterous, wouldn't it? You'd not only fail to achieve anything with the machine, but you'd run the risk of ruining it permanently.

So with children. You cannot just let them get on with it and stand benevolently by while they learn by their mistakes. Of course, as they grow and develop they will be learning from what they have already experienced and become more accustomed to making choices. But even those choices need to be

informed by something. The Bible's a good place to start and parents need to realise that from the outset. Give your children a love for this book and all that it contains. Show them that the principles contained in it make sense - and help to make sense of the world around them. And show them that you are prepared to live your life according to what is written in here.

Because it's not just laying down rules for behaviour that is important for parents and children. It's also vital that your attitudes and values are right - and that they are obvious in all that you do. What do you want for your children? Happiness, success - or righteousness? What kind of values does your life portray? A few years ago now, we looked at a series on Sunday mornings called *"The Wrong Dream"*, based on some ideas of Tom Sine. He reckons that western Christians are selling their children and young people *"the wrong dream"*, a dream of Western materialism that is totally at odds with what the Bible teaches. Listen to these words which I dug up recently from an article in *Nova* magazine back in the heady days of 1974: *"Providing for one's family as a good husband and father is a watertight excuse for making money hand over fist. Greed may be a sin, exploitation of other people may, on the face of it, look rather nasty, but who can blame a man for 'doing the best' for his children?"* Isn't part of the problem today that many parents are both out trying to fund a life-style that is driven by the world's values and that children are just left in the slipstream of fast-living parents?

Parenting is vital not only for this generation of children, but also because of the effects on succeeding generations. Jean-Paul Eixhter once wrote, *"What a father says to his children is not heard by the world but it will be heard by posterity."* The Bible talks graphically about the sins of the fathers being visited on their children and their children's children. Think very carefully about what you are teaching your children not by your direct actions and words, but by the attitudes which underpin your behaviour and the beliefs which you pass on to them through your general conversation and decisions. *"Train a child up in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it"* - it will be there, ingrained, imbibed, part of his own way of thinking and living for long years after you are gone.

3. PARENTING IS VALUABLE

If parenting is that vital, then we all need to recognise that it is valuable as well. In that series of articles in *The Guardian* to which I referred earlier, Melanie Phillips (who now writes for the *Daily Mail* - that's quite a shift!) wrote, *"Expectations, particularly of the mother, are pitched at a very high level; yet mothering is socially devalued."* There is the paradox! We all want children to grow up with the very best of help from mother and father, yet full-time mothers are economically inactive, so they are not really given any esteem. Many of them cannot wait to get back into work once the baby has arrived - sometimes because of economic necessity (especially lone mothers), sometimes to fund the lifestyle that they have bought into, but often to give themselves some kind of esteem. It is such a shame when you hear people referred to as *"only a mother"*.

Now I am not saying that the only place for a woman is in the home. Of course we all need to develop and use the many talents and abilities that God has given us, which may include those used in employment or voluntary occupations. What I am saying is, give parents some kind of recognition for what they do *as parents*. It's difficult and it's vital. The Bible sanctifies the image of parenting by using it to describe God; and, although we have a tendency to concentrate on the Fatherhood of God, as we have seen many times before, there's a fair bit about his **motherhood** as well - the hen and the chicks, the care for his people like a mother with a baby at her breast, the soothing words and tender care. God affirms the role of parent in his own being - let us do the same and encourage and support those who are grappling with the issues of parenthood.

And let me just say, in case it needs to be heard, that that goes even more so for those who are having to cope alone - for the widowed, the deserted, the abused, the divorced. If it is hard for two parents to cope, it is more than twice as hard for one. And the children in such situations have the same needs and the

same aspirations as any others. That pernicious idea that "It's her own fault, let her get on with it" can so easily creep into our thinking and we must banish it totally from all that we say and do. In London, whenever we had single mums asking for their babies to be dedicated in church, I was happy to do it (although we made it clear that it wasn't the ideal situation). But I reckon that the mums were as thankful for those babies as anyone else, and when we prayed for God's help for the parents, they needed that help just as much as anyone else, and the babies deserved God's blessing as much as any other baby. Parenting is valuable - remember that, parents, and feel proud that God has entrusted the task to you. Remember that, those of you who look on, and do all that you can to support, encourage and affirm, just as God does.

4. PARENTING IS BLESSED

Which brings us to our final point. God blesses those who take the task of parenting seriously. He doesn't give you the baby and then leave you to get on with it. He is there to enable you to make the most of the real joy of parenthood ("Aha," say some of you, "Your kids aren't teenagers yet, are they?" Well, yes they are, and it's still a joy). And he's there in the pain as well. When you're sitting by the hospital bed, when you're waiting outside the headteacher's office, when you're trying to find the bail money, when you're making arrangements for that unexpected grandchild. God knows the pain of parenthood as well as the joy - and he shares it with you. God knows you can't get it all right all the time and he stands by you when the difficulties arise and the consequences are worse than you expected. God is there when you have tried your very best, and people still point the finger at you and tell you you've got it all wrong. God loves your children even more than you do - he has his purposes for them and just because they haven't turned out the way you wanted doesn't mean God's given up on them.

You can turn to God for help in prayer, you can cry out to him whatever your need. He's there to help you in your parenting as he is in any other situation. And so, too, should be the rest of the family of Jesus Christ. We're all in this together, folks. Do you pray for the parents in this fellowship? Are you there to offer support and friendly advice to those who are struggling? Since we've been here at this church, we have benefited greatly from the help and support of others - I hope that has nothing to do with the fact that I'm the minister. So let us encourage one another in this as in all other aspects of our lives.

And, remembering all the things we said about not treating it like a checklist, let us not forget to turn for help and encouragement to God's word, the Bible. It's full of wise advice and useful teaching for every situation. It is, if you like, God's "User's Handbook". Neglect it at your peril.

There we are, then. That's not an exhaustive Bible study on parenting. Some of you may have considered it a waste of time - I hope you haven't, and that it will encourage you to pray for parents. Some of you may have disagreed with things that have been said - I hope you haven't, but feel free to discuss it with me if you want to. Some of you may have found it patronising or simplistic - I'm sorry. But I hope all of you recognise that being a parent is wonderful privilege and a mighty responsibility - and just like anything else, it helps to ensure that God's involved in it!