

Mothering Sunday 2016, Wade St.

Supermums

Every year Tesco's has awards for mothers who are judged to be exceptional in some way. (2016 winners.) Mothers like Val, who have fostered over 20 children, showing endless patience and understanding; mothers like Jain, who has not only cared for her own disabled child but devotes a tremendous amount of time to supporting other families. Most of us can think of a mother who seems to go beyond the ordinary – and I think you'll agree that we have several in this church.

But we can go too far along the road of idealising motherhood. A Woman's Hour programme 2 weeks ago suggested that motherhood had become a competitive sport, with people on Facebook 'tagging' mothers they think are marvellous and mummy-bloggers writing about their gorgeous children. The conclusion seemed to be that a little more honesty was needed when we can't see what goes on inside other people's homes.

Not-so-Good Mums!

The other extreme! These are genuine (though admittedly 'red-top') headlines.

A mother who discovered at an airport check-in desk that she had forgotten her 11-year-old son's passport went ahead with her holiday anyway after sending him home in a taxi with instructions on how to use the microwave!

A 15-year-old babysitter told the police that a mother had left her in sole charge of her three children (4, 2 and 11 months) before flying abroad on holiday.

The last one also had a story behind it but the headline reminded me of the verse in Isaiah, 'Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?' And then comes the realism and the reassurance: 'Though she may forget', says God, 'I will not forget you'. As we were reminded in one of our prayers, God is perfect and we are not.

'Good-enough' Mums (and Dads)?

I suspect that most parents (certainly including me) are somewhere between the 'superparents' and the terrible ones. Most of us do (or did) our best given the circumstances at the time. Our parents weren't perfect either – but they also did their best and it can be helpful to recognise that. Of course, parenting doesn't stop when children leave home – especially when they run out of money! (though it does have to be more arms-length!). It probably only ends when the children have to start managing the parents!

I'm not a Parent!

You might be sitting there and thinking, 'I'm not a parent! What's in this for me?' I read this week about Rachel, a young woman who has no children of her own but very much wanted to be involved in a child's development - so she volunteers as a mentor of a 9-year-old girl. She says, 'It means a lot to me have that contact and relationship that I can't have with a child of my own: helping her achieve her goals is a huge part of my life'. My single brother has been an excellent uncle to my children (and grandchildren); our daughter-in-law's sister (also single) is an exceedingly popular auntie. A single neighbour of ours has become part of another neighbour's family in a very real way and regularly helps out with their grandchildren. Sometimes children need someone to confide in who isn't their parent.

Krish Kandiah and his wife Miriam have adopted and fostered children. They started the 'Home for Good' organisation to encourage other Christians to do the same. Interviewed on

Songs of Praise recently, Krish told stories to illustrate the difference a loving Christian home makes in children's lives, something we see exemplified in several families in this church.

Within the church, nurturing and mentoring relationships can be very important. St Paul, as far as we know, was single, and yet he writes to Timothy as 'my **son** in the faith': he clearly believed that we have a special parent-like relationship with those we introduce to Jesus and nurture in their faith. Some of us are godparents, with a particular role in praying for children and sharing our faith with them.

And we are all members of families, each with an important part to play.

Families reflect God's nature

Families are God's idea! God himself is Father, Son and Spirit, Three-Persons-in-One. As people made in God's image, we need each other in order to thrive, and families (whether of 2 people or 20) are designed for mutual love and care. Ps. 68 says, 'God sets the lonely in families and he is 'a father to the fatherless' (and a mother to the motherless, too). God has brought us all into his family, the church, where we can give and receive support.

As we've seen earlier in the examples of 'supermums', being made in God's image means that we're capable of sacrificial love. Almost every week we hear of a parent or a sibling donating an organ or giving bone marrow to save the life of a family member. We also see it in those who risk their lives taking aid to dangerous places or in nursing Ebola patients.

Of course, families are not all sweetness and light. We have close Christian friends who have fallen out with the wife's sister and brother and have almost no contact with them. I find that very sad, especially as these friends are so welcoming and caring to people outside the family. Families can be difficult but I think we have a Christian responsibility to play our part in them unless that becomes impossible. We should thank God for our families, and our church family, despite their – and our! - imperfections.

When we bring children for dedication, we promise to bring them up in the Christian faith and we pray that one day they will make it their own. Christian parenting is not easy in our society (Sam) and even more difficult when only one parent is a committed Christian. It was the same for Timothy's mother Eunice, a Jewish woman married to a Greek, in a society where Christianity was at best considered an obscure and troublesome sect. But Eunice had the support of her own mother, Lois, who had taught her, and together they taught Timothy the Christian faith ('from infancy you have known the holy scriptures' OT) and in time Timothy too became a Christian. 2 Tim 1v 5: "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and ...now in you also". So, be encouraged to continue to teach your children (even if you're doing it on your own). And don't give up – fruit can take a long time to grow. We shouldn't feel that we've failed if our children don't (yet) share our faith. Each person has to make their own choices and our responsibility is to introduce them to Jesus – and then keep praying!

The other part of the dedication service is that as a church we promise to pray for the parents and the child and to be part of their Christian nurture. We're familiar with the African proverb, 'It takes a whole village to raise a child'. We could also say that it takes a whole church to raise a child in the Christian faith. Sunday Club and Youth leaders are very important here – and often v significant in children's lives – but we can't leave it all to them. Some years ago Anne Badcock asked us each to pray regularly for a child or young person – we had to pick a name out of a hat (basket?). I got Bryony – so it must have been a while ago – and it really felt like taking on an important (and pleasurable!) responsibility. Paul and I were very grateful for the interest and prayers of others for our children, even when they went off to university. I know that our current leaders will be grateful for prayer support for

the young people, too. Sharing in the responsibility for Christian nurture is open to us all and part of our commitment as church members.

Grandparents, too, can be vital in teaching children the Christian faith, particularly if their parents don't do so. The 2016 WWDP service (Friday), written by the women of Cuba, suggests that in that country there's a missing generation in the church. One of the older women says, 'We have kept the faith despite discrimination against us for believing in God and gathering to worship. We have passed the Word of God to our grandchildren. Through us, they've learned that God loves them and have come to believe in him'. I think that's a great testimony – and I know that a number of people in our congregation are also passing on the faith to their grandchildren. Aunts, uncles and close friends, too, have the opportunity to build a special relationship with children and reach them in a way that sometimes parents can't.

It's a privilege to be in a family, whatever our role, but we need God's help to play our part effectively **because**

Families have never been perfect!

Is your family perfect? No? Neither is mine!

We've all seen family dramas in the street or the supermarket. I took one of our younger grandchildren shopping recently and she was fascinated to observe how one mother was dealing with her children – you can guess! It was half term week so the poor mum was feeling a bit harassed. We were in a queue so I couldn't distract my granddaughter! - and unfortunately she hasn't yet learned not to stare! However, sometimes the outward appearance is perfect but all is not well behind closed doors. And even in the happiest of families, there are tensions and difficulties – because we're all human.

Some time ago, the novelist Julie Myerson wrote about her son's drug abuse, for which she and her husband had asked him to leave home (as they were advised to do) because of the effect his behaviour was having on the younger children. The press either vilified her for selfishness (and making money out of the situation) or praised her for her courage. We have friends who have lived with a similar situation: loving Christian parents who have tried both 'tough love' and forgiving generosity. Who can say which is the right way? I only know that we shouldn't judge because we don't know about the pressures other people live under - and coping with addiction of any kind in the family stretches people to breaking point.

The Bible is a realistic book – and it pulls no punches about family life. The first recorded sibling relationship - Cain and Abel – ended with murder. And there are many accounts of dysfunctional families from Genesis onwards. Families have never been perfect!

Just as Christian parenting and church nurture can have positive long-term results, so serious parenting mistakes can have long-term effects. And they don't come much more serious than favouritism. Rebekah and Isaac had twin sons and we read (Gen.25) that as they grew up 'Isaac loved Esau but Rebekah loved Jacob.' Unsurprisingly (though unusually for twins) the boys didn't get on either. Both parents were unhappy with Esau's choice of wives. Rebekah deceived her husband to get the traditional blessing for Jacob, her favourite. And so it went on! With that example, when Jacob came to have children, what did he do? He had favourites! Most particularly Joseph, and we all know the trouble that led to!

We can all think of parenting mistakes that our parents made, probably because of their own childhood experiences. Most parents are determined not to repeat their own parents' mistakes – and then we do! We might feel guilty about it. But you'll notice that there's a BUT at the bottom of the slide

Forgiveness can break the cycle

After many years of estrangement, Jacob took gifts and journeyed (rather fearfully) to meet his brother Esau and they were reconciled. Joseph forgave his brothers for their treatment of him (and also rather let them off the hook by saying that it was all part of God's plan anyhow) and provided for them and their children from the wealth he had acquired in Egypt. There is no record of any further problems with favouritism in Joseph's family. Forgiveness had broken the cycle.

God in Christ has forgiven us – and in doing so has broken the 'cycle' of sin and spiritual death in our lives. In Romans chaps. 5&6 Paul explains that, as sin entered the world through Adam, so life came through Jesus. 'Count yourselves dead to sin, he says, but alive to God in Christ Jesus'. The cycle has been broken - but we still need to put that into practice in our relationships.

Many people go through life harbouring resentment about their upbringing. We will only break out of that destructive cycle if we forgive. I read this week about Nicky, now in her 40s: her childhood was blighted by her mother's alcoholism. From the age of 9, she lived with violence, anger and mood swings until her mother's early death. "I carried the story of my mother's alcoholism with me like a black cloud" she said, but in the past 2 years I've come to understand my mother, forgive her and think of her with love. Now she gives talks in schools and prisons to help other young people who are going through what she experienced. Without forgiving, she would still have been imprisoned and unable to help others.

Some of us may have experienced our children causing us great distress. Forgiveness is still the only way to free ourselves – and them - from the pain.

Paul, writing to the churches in both Ephesus and Colossae, urges fathers (the ones who had control over the household) not to exasperate or embitter their children, in case they became discouraged. It's possible (even likely!) that we've caused problems for our children by some aspects of our parenting. We may need to ask them to forgive us. I've certainly done things I'm not proud of and had to say 'sorry' to my children at times; thankfully, they've been very forgiving. (*Though it's somewhat deflating when they say, Oh! Don't worry – I don't remember that!*) Equally, we might need to put right a relationship with our spouse or a sibling so that the bad feeling doesn't affect the whole family.

It takes a conscious and determined effort to break the cycle of wrong behaviour. There will be different issues in each family but forgiveness must go hand-in-hand with practical action.

And then we need to forgive ourselves. RT Kendall (former minister Westminster Chapel) wrote a book called *Totally Forgiving Ourselves* in which he emphasises that, although God forgives us when we ask him, we will only enjoy the benefits of that forgiveness in this life if we also forgive ourselves. We need to leave the past behind and recognise (Rom 8 v28) that God can bring good out of situations even where we have been at fault. Carrying guilt around (and I guess that might be more of a female trait?) stops us from living joyfully as God intended.

God is the ultimate good parent

We learn a lot about that from the story of the loving father that Jeanie read to us.

At her wedding, our daughter thanked us for our unconditional love: we appreciated that - but it's what most parents give. God doesn't only love us when we come up to scratch or when we put our faith in him. Rom 5 v 8: 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us'. The father in the story went on loving his son, despite his rebellion.

And God gives us everything we need. Children don't worry about where their food and clothes are coming from – they trust their parents. Jesus told his disciples to be like that: 'don't worry, your father knows your needs'. But children need more than food and clothes – they need emotional support – someone to listen to them. God supplies that in abundance: more ready to listen (we are told) than we are to pray.

It's hard to give children the freedom to choose, when we know they will make mistakes. But we have to do it. The father in the story knew he was taking a risk. And God takes a risk with us. He doesn't force us to follow him. We have to choose.

And when we've chosen our own way, like the father in the story, God waits for us to return. How many parents of teenagers have done that in the early hours, looking anxiously at watches, wondering what to do? (I suppose mobile phones have changed all that – have they?)

God not only waits but he goes out looking for us, like the shepherd with one straying sheep, or the father in the story who spotted his son in the distance making his way home. And, like that father, God never gives up on us and is always ready to forgive. **Philip Yancey** (*What's so Amazing about Grace*) tells the following story: (p. 56)

Most parents feel that, if it came to the crunch, they would sacrifice their own lives for their children. Jesus did give up his life for us because he **is** the **Good** Shepherd, the perfect parent (not the one who runs away when the going gets tough). He gave his life so that we can have 'life in all its fulness' now and life with him forever.

Those who are parents will have experience of dropping everything, however important, if one of their children needs them. (On holiday in Plymouth: call from our daughter in US staying with her then boyfriend's parents: *please* can you meet me at Heathrow. We sensed that all was not well – which it wasn't! We had to drive through the night to get there in time!) Many close friends would do the same for each other, too. But in human relationships we can, and do, let each other down at times. Jesus promised his followers that he would be with them always: that promise is for us too.

We can (and should) reflect God's parenting

Because God is the ultimate good parent, as his children we should reflect his parenting. This applies to us all, whatever our family situation. We can demonstrate his love, patience, forgiveness and generosity in our families, amongst our neighbours, at work and in church. If we all truly did that it would make a huge difference to the whole community. We know we can't do it on our own – it's too hard! We need to work in partnership with the Holy Spirit and to ask for help to live every day in his strength. **Amen**

Hazel Rendle, March 2016