

Trinity 2  
July 2020  
Matthew 10: 24-39

*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.*

Although our Church Lectionary today is simply headed Trinity 2, the second Sunday after Trinity, I can imagine shouts of objection if I failed to mention that it is also Father's Day. Unlike Mothering Sunday, which has been a church festival for centuries, Father's Day is a more recent addition, transferred from our American cousins, presumably to restore the balance. And it is good to remember our fathers today, whether they are still a vital part of our family, or no longer with us. One father I must mention is Olly Richbell, son of our much-missed David. Olly, who is Chairman of the Bedford branch of the Wooden Spoon charity is one of five nominees for Wagon Wheel's Epic Dad of the Year, nominated by his daughter who is very proud of him.

The Gospel for today, which includes the challenging and thought-provoking statement I am reflecting on, seems a strange choice for a day in which the importance of family life is emphasized. It is coincidental, of course, since it follows on from last week's Gospel in which Jesus first chooses his twelve disciples and then sends them out with instructions to 'Go out and proclaim the good news'. Here he is continuing to teach them and making plain from the outset the cost of discipleship. It must have been quite thrilling to be chosen from among the many following Jesus as those he wants in his inner circle, to learn all that he has to teach and to follow his instructions to 'cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons.' However, this week's Gospel begins with a warning, lest they become too over-confident: 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master'.

And then follows a series of instructions, some of which might seem contradictory. It is important that the twelve know what they are letting themselves in for from the outset.

And perhaps nothing is quite as challenging as the uncompromising assertion that they must be prepared to put their new teacher first, before everything – mother, father, brother, sister. If they are indeed to follow him, then they must put him first.

If this is a command which we find difficult, it was even more so in the culture into which Jesus had been born. For them, family meant everything; they could trace their family tree back for centuries – indeed at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel the writer gives the genealogy of Jesus, tracing it back to Abraham. Their history, inextricably bound with their religion was a source of pride and taught in their synagogues. As we know, the fourth Commandment states: 'Honour your father and your mother,' and elsewhere Jesus himself asserts that he has come to fulfil the law. So how can we explain the apparent contradiction?

I am currently reading a quite challenging book about the child migrants sent, during the twentieth century, from children's homes in Great Britain to the other side of the world – mainly to Australia, but also to other Commonwealth countries. In 1975 when the law was changed to enable those who were adopted to obtain their birth certificate and, should they wish, find their birth mother, Margaret Humphreys, a social worker, received a letter from a woman in Australia seeking help to find her mother. From this small beginning she uncovered details of the vast number of adults in those countries who had been told as children that they were orphans and that they had no family. They had no documentation, no birth certificate, and, as the writer reveals, this

left them with a deep feeling of inadequacy and loss of self worth. What they desired more than anything was an identity. One letter she received from someone in Australia summed it up:

*'After more than forty-two years, it would be nice to know that I belong to someone, someone belongs to me and that I can share myself with those who are mine, thus giving me a peace of mind and a joy that I have never known and, up to now, I never thought could be mine.'*

It is not an easy book to read, particularly discovering the harsh treatment that these children suffered, and I was tempted to put it to one side in favour of something less harrowing, but I persevered.

Belonging, having an identity, knowing who we are, this is what is vital for all of us. And when Jesus spelt it out for his new disciples, he wanted them to be under no illusion. If they were to follow him, to do the things that he did, then their allegiance to him must come first. Their role as his disciples was their new identity; their love for him must come first.

At our baptism the sign of the cross was made on our forehead, an invisible mark that we wear as a witness to our faith. We are all God's children, whether we acknowledge him or not; whether we know him or not, he knows and loves us. But those of us who affirm that we are Christians, like those chosen disciples, have a new identity, one which we carry with pride, one which carries with it a responsibility.

So we remember our fathers today, most, though not all, with affection; for some it is just a remembrance, some whose grief is still raw, their loss still overwhelming, others whose memories are

more distant. But our fathers are part of our history, affirming who we are, sons and daughters. And today we also are challenged by our Gospel reading to remember our identity as sons and daughters of the living God, the heavenly Father whom we all share.