

Father's Day Sermon 2017

Some of you will know that this weekend is the Queen's official 91st birthday and in light of recent events, she has released a statement to the nation, recognising that although it is supposed to be a day of celebration, the nation is very much still in mourning.

On Friday The Queen and the Duke of Cambridge visited the scene of the Grenfell Tower where 30 people died and over 70 are still believed missing.

In a statement released by Buckingham Palace, The Queen said: *"Today is traditionally a day of celebration. This year, however, it is difficult to escape a very' sombre national mood. In recent months, the country has witnessed a succession of terrible tragedies."*

Given that we're living in peace time, the vigils and images in the newspapers and on social media are more reminiscent of a time of war. In the last few months we've had the Westminster attack, the Manchester attack, the London Bridge attack and now the terrible fire in Grenfell Tower.

Fear and death and violence seem to be all around. And the severity of all three seems almost unbearable – horrific and extreme.

And yet, as a result of these horrific happenings, we've also witnessed extraordinary acts of heroism, kindness, compassion and deep, compassionate neighbourliness. Just as these events have revealed the divisions between us – whether that be due to the influence of extremist ideologies, or by highlighting the economic gulf between the rich and the poor, these acts of deep kindness and goodness have shown, in the words of the MP Jo Cox, that "we have more in common than that which divides us".

It's a year since Jo Cox MP was murdered and today there are over 120,000 events in her honour – called the "Great Get Together". Her husband Brendan Cox, said that the scale of the response "showed the country was crying out for sense of togetherness."

"The Great Get Together" is based on the message in Mrs Cox's maiden speech in Parliament that "we have more in common than that which divides us".

So how do we mark Father's Day against such a backdrop? And how do we reflect on God's fatherly love towards us against such a backdrop? What inspiration can we draw from the scriptures and from God's universal love towards all of us?

Well let's begin with Psalm 103, one of my favourite psalms in the bible. This psalm is a great leveller – all are in the pit and need rescuing by God – rescuing with his life-giving love and mercy.

The psalm we heard puts all of us on the same page – all of humanity – all needing the sustenance of God our heavenly father – all needing his forgiveness, all needing his compassion. He remembers that we are dust – all mortal and fragile – and we remember that we are all his children.

The God described here is on the side of all those who are oppressed – on the side of those in need of justice, on the side of those whose voice is not heard. But for those of us, who come to church today with a sense that our fathers were inadequate – here is a picture of a compassionate God who loves us with an everlasting love. We can prayerfully seek to live our lives under the truth of God's compassionate, everlasting love – rather than under the banner of sadness we might feel from our negative experiences of our earthly fathers. That can sound trite – and I don't want it to – damage done to us by our parents can be horrendous – and some of us may need to pay particular attention to that – but I do believe there is grace and healing that can bring us into a better place.

But also this psalm can inspire the kind of parent we want to be. What do we want to model to our children – both our literal and metaphorical children? Do we want to model speaking out for the oppressed? Do we want to be compassionate? Do we want to bring healing to a broken world?

I think there's a sense in which we can be overwhelmed by what's going on and somehow gnawing at the back of our heads is a feeling that we might as well give up. Evil in all its forms – whether that's terrorism or rampant, unbridled capitalism or the gulf between different ideologies is so gigantic that we cannot cross it – and we huddle in to protect our own – our own nuclear family, our own faith community, our own turf.

And that's understandable. And sometimes, that is what we need to do. There's nothing wrong with nurturing, protecting, sustaining.

But that cannot be our way of being. We cannot live with a siege mentality.

In the gospel passage we heard read, Joseph, as Jesus' earthly father, is in a time of crisis – and is told by the angel to “flee to Egypt” – they flee as thousands of refugee families have done before and since in times of peril, to neighbouring or far off countries – they do what they need to do to survive. Joseph does what's right for his family at that time – he takes hard decisions – and brings them to a place of safety, following the angel's instructions.

And sometimes Fathers, parents, leaders have to do that. Have to take the family, the community, the people, to a place of refuge, a place of safety.

But ultimately, Joseph and Mary and Jesus return to Nazareth and live a life in the community – where Jesus grows up to be a rabbi, teaching his followers to be salt and light in the world.

We need as a community – in all our diversity – to remember and acknowledge that we are all children of God, made in his image, created and loved by him – and seek in each other that shared, common humanity.

Our families – our parents – our fathers can help us so much in our understanding of the world. They can help us either to divide the world into them and us – or to teach our children to reach out to their fellow human beings with love and compassion. We can teach our children to live in the light of fear and hate, or to teach our children to live from the energy of love and hope.

My father taught me dozens of important things. I want to highlight three today.

The first was that the greatest singer-songwriter in the English language was Bob Dylan and his work should be taken very seriously.

The second was to love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, strength and mind.

And the third was that all people are equal – regardless of their social status or background. My father believed this and showed this through his words and actions. This belief was initially rooted in his committed and heartfelt Marxism. And in his forties it became part of his worldview as a committed, practising Christian.

All people matter.

We have more in common than that which divides us.

See Christ in the face of a stranger.

Father's Day is a day when we want to honour the good job that millions of fathers do. We want to thank all the dads today for the love, care, hard work, and sacrifices – thank you. We want to thank uncles and grandfathers, godfathers and brothers. Thank you. Every man, who through being an honourable person himself inspires a child to be an honourable person, deserves our heartfelt thank you today.

As we celebrate and remember Fathers on father's day, as we feel deep gratitude and thankfulness, or struggle with feelings of longing and regret – I pray that the healing grace of God the Father would heal, strengthen and empower us – so that we might be salt and light in the world – bringing hope to a hurting and damaged world.

Amen.

Notes from the sermon preached on Father's Day, 2017, by Revd Sheridan James, Vicar of St Catherine, Hatcham