

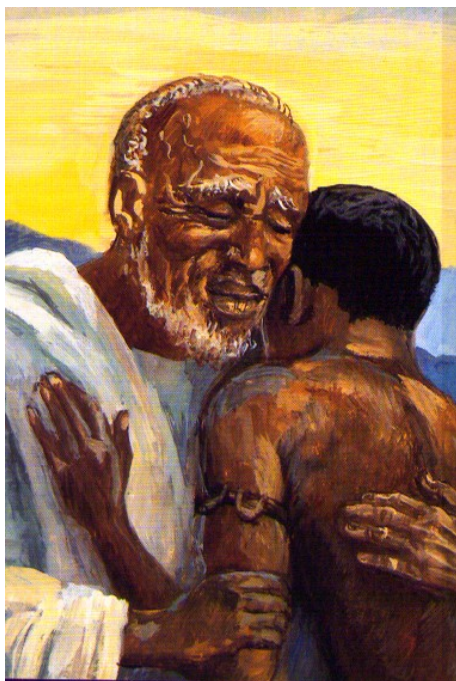
GOD THE FATHER

Heavenly Father, Holy One, awesome are the works you've done. High and lifted up you reign, yet you know this one by name, yet you know my name. These words of a gospel song remind us the glory of having God as our Father. He is the transcendent and magnificent creator of all things. It is to Him that all authority and power belongs. We might think that he has better things to do than concern himself with us. But he tenderly calls us his children and provides for us at every minute. There is not one beat of our heart, one breath we take, not one thing we receive that God has not enabled and provided for. Thus he is a good God and as a Father, provides for all our needs. Yet it must be said that it is one thing to speak of God's fatherly care and another to actually experience it. That is why scripture teaches that the ability to call upon God as Father and experience his fatherly care is particularly a work and a gift of the Holy Spirit. Consider the following passage

Calling God, "Father" is a gift of the Spirit

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption through which we cry out, "Abba!" (that is, "Father!") The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:15-16). Notice this passage teaches that it is through the Holy Spirit that we are able to experience God as Father. The Holy Spirit draws us not only to the realization that God is our Father but also to the fact that we are his children. This is why the word "Abba" in this passage is important. The word "Father" can be merely a title or a description and, of itself have

a rather abstract meaning. But "Abba" is the family term for father. Perhaps the best way to translate it is, "Papa" or "Daddy." This insight helps us to see the true glory of this work of the Spirit enabling us to call God "Abba." By the power and grace of the Holy Spirit our hearts are more and more moved to experience that the awesome, omnipotent God who has all authority and power and to whom all honor, obedience and thanksgiving belong is pleased to have us call him



"Papa." This work of the Spirit is more than pronouncing a word. A parrot could be taught to say the word. The work of the Spirit is to enable us to directly experience and encounter God the Father as "Abba."

What an astonishing and wonderful gift it is to be able to know and experience and call upon God in this way. It is no mere title or image it is a reality that God wishes ardently for us to experience. He is Abba.

Revealing the Love of the Father Central to Jesus' Mission

Consider for example how central it was to Jesus' ministry to point to the Father. Jesus mentions the Father over 175 times in the four gospels, describing him, insisting on his will, speaking of his love, patience, providence and compassion. Jesus drew others to trust the Father, praise him, pray to him and acknowledge that he is the source of every blessing and of life itself. Perhaps Jesus' most memorable and moving parable was the Parable of the Prodigal Son which was actually more a teaching about the Father than it was of the sinful young man. Jesus teaches of a Father who lovingly looked for his wayward child to return and when he saw him, was deeply moved and ran out to meet him, embraced his child, clothed him in royal vestments, and held a joyful celebration in honor of his return. Jesus teaches, "This is what my Father and your heavenly Father is like!" He truly is Abba, ("Papa") to us. Jesus surely wanted us to know the Father and how very much he loves us. Just before he went to cross he said, *O righteous Father, the world has not known thee, but I have known thee; and these know that thou hast sent me. I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.* (Jn 17:25-26)

Therefore the first step for us in understanding God the Father is simply to yield to the ministry of the Spirit within and to rejoice in the Father's love and care for us. It is important too for us to make an act of faith in his goodness and care: "Heavenly Father, I believe in your love for me." An old hymn says, *I trust in God, wherever I may be, upon*

the land or on the rolling sea; For come what may from day to day, My heavenly Father watches over me. I trust in God...though billows roll, he keeps my soul, My Heavenly Father watches over me.

Obstacles

Each of us may struggle to fully experience the love of God our Father. Each of us has an earthly father and we are bound to compare God the Father to him. If our relationship to our earthly father was good then perhaps we can more easily understand God's fatherly care. However, it is increasingly the case today that many individuals have a difficult, distant or even non-existent relationship with their earthly father. This will often make it more difficult to appreciate what it means to have God as our Father. Prayer, the study of scripture and conversations with spiritual friends are all ways to overcome whatever obstacles we may face in understanding and appreciating God as our Father. We must also know by faith that the Spirit is ministering to us, helping us to overcome obstacles and drawing us to a deeper experience of Abba. Lastly, it is important to realize that our earthly fathers are not the model for God's Fatherhood. Rather, God the Father is the model for their fatherhood. He is perfect Father and when we consider him as our Father we must attempt to screen out whatever imperfect or exaggerated notions of fatherhood we may have received from the world. *By calling God "Father", the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children.* (Catechism, 239).

Why not call God "Mother?"

Some in our modern age wonder

why God cannot be addressed in feminine pronouns and as "Mother." The quickest response to this is emphasize that the Bible must be normative for us in the ways that we understand and speak of God. The Bible is not our words about God, it is word and revelation to us. Thus we are bound by what is revealed in scriptures. The Bible does use images of motherhood in several places to describe God's care for us [cf Deut 32:18; Is 42:13-15; 49:14-15; 66:13; Ps 131:2]. However though in several places the Bible says God is like a mother it never says that he *is* mother. Likewise, there is never a case of a feminine pronoun such as "she" or "her" being used to refer to God. For this reason it is inappropriate for us to adopt such language. Acknowledging some motherlike qualities in God is about as far as we can go. Note this teaching from the catechism:

God's parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood,[Deut 32:18; Is 42:13-15; 49:14-15; 66:13; Ps 131:2] which emphasizes God's immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature. The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard:[Ps 27:10; Eph 3:14; Is 49:15] no one is father as God is Father. (Catechism 239).

Living as God's Children

If God is our Father then we are his children. Most of us have great

resemblances to our earthly parents. We look a lot like them, sound like them and have many of the same mannerisms, traits and talents. Well then, when we understand that God is our Father it follows that we are to share in his nature and reflect many of his traits. We are to sound like God, love like God, think like God, be like God. *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are... Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as he is righteous...No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God. By this it may be seen who are the children of God (1 John 3:1-10).* We are God's children now and yet it also remains painfully true that some of the old traits of Adam and Eve still remain in us and are being put to death. But the more we realize who we are and whose we are, the more we can yield to God's fatherly work in us and become the children he has made us to be. That is why the following words of Jesus are a promise, not a threat: *You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* (Matt 5:48)

How could it be any other way. If God is our Father then we will grow up to be just like him, perfect in every way, by his grace. Child of God, become what you are! *And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.* (Phil 1:6)