

# 2CH Sunday at 7.30

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

## The forgotten father

Presented by Bob Smith

### Introduction

My initiation into fatherhood took place early on the morning of 19<sup>th</sup> March, 1971. As I arrived breathlessly at the Maternity wing of the Blacktown Hospital, excitedly announcing myself as the new father, I was confronted by a rather officious woman in a nursing sister's uniform who, seemingly annoyed by my arrival, told me to 'sit over there until we are ready for you.' It set a pattern that has dogged me for years.

I sometimes get the feeling that, for my generation at least, a father's lot in western society was to be an unavoidable nuisance, tolerated until such times as they might be found to be useful. Mothers were obviously important – but fathers seemed to play the part of best supporting actor in the emerging drama. However I do think that is now changing. My son-in-law was present for the birth of our first grandchild – ready with video camera to capture his arrival (backside first) into the world. He was even allowed a trundle bed to stay in the ward with mother and baby. But it wasn't that way for me.

### 1. It Still Hurts

I read a rather moving story in the *Readers Digest* some years ago, all the more significant because it was written by a woman. She wrote about how, as a little girl, she was given a boy doll. She was puzzled and didn't know what to do with it because real dolls were supposed to be girls not boys. So she tossed it into the back of a cupboard and left it there.

A boy doll was out of place in a doll's house – like her father. Mothers were important; they are there with you most of the time. They feed you, cuddle you and take you shopping. But fathers are those people you only see at odd times. They leave for work before you are awake, and they get home just in time to see you put to bed. You are a bit scared of them because if you have been naughty your mother always tells you to 'just wait until your father gets home.'

However there were a couple of good things about fathers. They play much better games than mothers – much more fun; and they run for hundreds of miles alongside your bike while you are learning to ride without trainer wheels. But most of the time it's hard to know where they belong in the all female environment of the home.

Then one day, she said, her father suddenly got sick. An ambulance came and took him away and she never saw him again. He died two days later. She only saw his coffin at the funeral. She was too young to understand what all the fuss was about. But when she got home the first thing she did was to go to the cupboard and find that boy doll, which she then set in the dolls house amongst all the others. She said, "I couldn't understand why it hurt so much. It still hurts."

## 2. God our Father

Well, of all the terms Jesus used for God, the one that overwhelmingly predominates is the word ‘Father.’ This didn’t start with Jesus; as far back as the Book of Deuteronomy God is called ‘Father.’

The reason is this. It has nothing to do with God being a male – the Bible clearly teaches that God is Spirit. What it means is that to understand the unknowable God, whose being is so far beyond our comprehension, we have to use concepts that we do know and understand. And for Jesus, the ideal of fatherhood was what best described God. The very best of what a father is helps us to understand what God is.

Another way of looking at it is the opposite – not that God is like a good father, but that a good father is like God. The Greek philosopher Plato introduced an idea like this into western thinking. He taught that what we think of as the realities of this life are in actual fact mere shadows of a heavenly reality. In this way the ideal of human fatherhood is a faint shadow of what God is. And all those things that a good father does for us – providing for our needs, protecting us, guiding and teaching us, disciplining us and preparing us to become self reliant, responsible and capable citizens in this world – is what God does for so that we might become worthy citizens of His eternal kingdom.

## 3. The Parable of the Father’s Heart

Probably the best known of all Jesus’ stories is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It could also be called the Parable of the Father’s Heart, because the true hero in it was the father. I think you probably know the story well – the no-hoper son who wanted his hard working Dad to finance him on a voyage of discovery through the red light districts of a place just far enough away that his father wouldn’t know what he was really up to, thinking instead that the boy was making his own way in life.

Jewish law at that time decreed that an elder son was to receive two thirds of his father’s estate while the younger son would receive one third. Scholars tell us that it was not unusual for a father to distribute his estate early in order to help his sons get on their feet financially. But even so, there is a certain callousness in the younger son’s request to his father, “Let me enjoy it now; who knows how long I’ll have to wait for you to die.”

But why, you might ask, did the father give in to him? Perhaps he knew, as do many of us, that the only way his child would learn would be the hard way. Many of us have had to face this reality with our own children. It is very painful to accept that we have to let them go their own way, particularly when we are pretty sure they will make a mess of things; but there comes a time when we realize there is no other option.

Well, that, I suspect is the conclusion this father came to. And his worst fears were fulfilled. His son squandered his inheritance – all that money that the father had worked hard to provide for him. (Is there anything more infuriating than seeing the next generation squander what their parents laboured, scrimped and saved to provide for them? In many ways it is the story of the pre-war generation that went through the Great Depression and the Second World War, and their baby boomer kids whom they wanted to spare the hard times they knew). Well, in the case of this young man, that’s what happened, and he ended up doing the most degrading job a Jew could do – feeding pigs, and doing it for starvation wages.

It was then, the Bible says, that the young man “came to himself” or, as we would say, ‘woke up to himself.’ I’ve long believed in the enormous therapeutic value of not protecting people from the consequences of their actions. It’s very hard to do, especially when it’s your own loved ones that have to learn the hard lesson. But

it often works when everything else fails. Alcoholics Anonymous have always known this. They have always said that an alcoholic has got to 'hit rock bottom' before they will honestly seek help.

Well, it worked for that young man. He decided to go home and beg his father for a labouring job on the farm. And while still along way off his father saw him coming. One gets the feeling that that old man used to stand there day after day, staring down the road, just hoping that that might be the day when his boy would come home. And at last, it happened. The old man ran to meet him, threw his arms around him and before the boy could begin his rehearsed speech, he ordered the servants to bring the best robe, a pair of shoes and a ring and to put them on him. Then he sent them off to prepare a party to celebrate the fact that the son who had been lost was now found; he was back home, safe. The gamble had paid off.

And Jesus told that story to do one thing – to teach us, in a way that we could understand, what God is truly like. All that is finest in human fatherhood is the merest shadow of what God is to us. We go our own way, we break His heart, but He keeps on loving and waiting for us to come to ourselves – to wake up to ourselves – and to come home to Him. And when we do He receives us back with great joy, and calls upon the whole host of Heaven to celebrate. That's the whole message of the Gospel.

And so, this Father's Day, I want us to reflect on the 'forgotten father'. Often maligned for all his shortcomings, trying to balance the multifarious demands of work, home, professional education and so on. Required to be a good provider, strong decision maker and nurturing parent capable of sharing in all the tasks of child rearing bar one. Not always doing it very well, but, hopefully trying the best he can. And in reflecting on him I want us to reflect on the Father of whom he is but a mere shadow – our Heavenly Father, so often forgotten, but who never forgets us.

## **Conclusion**

I came across a rather sad but wonderful incident some time ago. A father took his small son, who had been unwell for some time, to a specialist for tests. When the results finally came through they learned that the child had terminal cancer. During the following days that man tried desperately to think about how he would prepare his child to receive the news that he was going to die. Now, he was a man of faith and had always taught his son that God was his loving heavenly Father. So, finally he plucked up courage and told the child what lay ahead.

Then he said to him, "Are you afraid to meet God?"

And do you know what the little boy said? "Not if He's like you, Dad."