

The Love of the Father

Genesis 21:9-21

Father's Day

20 June 2010

In a book entitled, "Fatherhood", comedian Bill Cosby reflects on the inequities between Father's Day and Mother's Day. Mother's Day, he points out, is a much bigger deal because mothers are more organised than fathers. "Mothers say to their children: Now here is a list of what I want. Go get the money from your father and surprise me on Mother's Day." But, Cosby says, when, some years ago, he tried to organise Father's Day in the same way, everything backfired on him. He could not tell his children to get the money for gifts from their mother so he would have to give it to them himself. "For Father's Day," he says, "I gave each of my five kids \$20 so that they could go out and buy me a present – a total of \$100. They would go to the store and buy two packages of underwear, each of which cost \$5 and contained three shorts. They would tear them open and each kid would wrap up one pair, the sixth pair of underwear going to the Salvation Army. Therefore, on Father's Day, I am walking around with new underwear and my kids are walking around with \$90 worth of my change in their pockets."¹

What a wonderful comedian Bill Cosby has been over the years! What a wonderful sense of humour he has! His family must have been very proud of him. And, without being too pessimistic, one hopes that they will continue to be proud of him. Remembering, of course, the scandal that swirled around him a few years ago when several women – one of them Canadian – made allegations of inappropriate behaviour. One hopes that his children and grandchildren will never come to learn anything negative or unsavoury about him.²

What a terrible experience that must be for children to find out that their father, their hero, their role-model, the one whom they admire, is not quite the man that they thought he was. What will it be like in the future for Tiger Woods' children, for instance, when they learn that he was something other than a world famous golfer? Or, what about South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford's children when they discover that their father had an Argentinian mistress, or David Letterman's son when he grows up and reads about the scandal that once surrounded his father?

Reeve Lindbergh tells of such a dreadful experience regarding his father, pioneering aviator Charles Lindbergh. As a boy, Reeve hero-worshipped the man because of his daring first solo flight across the Atlantic. But later, he was shocked to learn his father was a Nazi sympathizer and anti-Semitic. Reading a 1941 speech made by his father, Reeve was very distressed. "I could read a chilling distinction," he said, "between [the way he

spoke about] Jews and other Americans. This was something I did not recognise in the father I knew. Something I had been taught to condemn under the heading 'discrimination', something from another time."

Despite this horrible iconoclastic discovery, Reeve was still able to find something to admire about his father. "I am touched," he said, "by the enormity of my father's accomplishment in its effect on those who witnessed it and those whom it inspired."³

I wonder if Ishmael in the Old Testament was as charitable towards his father, Abraham, when, in later times, he learned the truth of how he had been treated as a boy. In a story replete with sin, sex and surrogate mothers, the Book of Genesis tells how Abraham had grown very old and was unhappy that he and his wife Sarah were childless. They had no son, no heir, to carry on the family name and give them that feeling of immortality for which they so greatly longed.⁴

But then Sarah came up with what she thought was a great way of solving this seemingly insurmountable problem. Though she herself was well past child-bearing years, could it be that Hagar – her beautiful, young Egyptian maid – might supply their much needed child? It was certainly a possibility. So Sarah suggested to Abraham that he might father a child with Hagar and give them their much-needed heir. "The Lord has kept me from having children. Why don't you sleep with my slave girl? Perhaps she can have a child for me."⁵

Now, this was a proposition to which Abraham readily agreed. Although, perhaps a little too readily, if the truth be told! He didn't even go through the whole charade of feigning distaste. "Oh, no, dear, I couldn't possibly do such a thing." Like a good and obedient husband, he did what he was told and soon Hagar was pregnant with his child. The elderly couple had achieved their life's dream. They had a son and heir. Something they thought impossible. And everyone was happy ... well, not quite!

Don't you just hate those times in life when everything seems to be coming up roses, then, in a heartbeat, it all changes? This is exactly the way it was for Abraham. Suddenly his wife, Sarah, had a change of heart. No longer did she think that her brilliant idea was so brilliant anymore because the green-eyed monster had crept into the picture. Hagar had been able to give Abraham something she, Sarah, couldn't give her and she was consumed by jealousy.

Not only that, the story takes another unexpected twist when Sarah miraculously becomes pregnant herself and delivers a boy named Isaac.⁶ Now, Sarah's jealousy

is stepped up another level. She comes to hate Ishmael even more than she did. She can't stand the sight of him nor bear to think that he might someday inherit the bulk of his father's wealth which she believes should go exclusively to her son, Isaac.⁷

Sarah is so resentful that she comes up with an evil plan. She demands that Abraham throw Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert, and abandon them there. Which, amazingly, Abraham does. He rolls over without a word of protest, with nary a whimper. He willingly becomes complicit in Sarah's manipulations and manoeuvrings. So in one of the saddest scenes in the whole Bible, he sends Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness of Beersheba with just a few days supply of food and water.⁸

What kind of father would do such a thing? What kind of father would stand by and see his child treated in such a cruel and heartless way? And what did Ishmael think of his father, later in life, when he came to realise what this man had done to him and his mother all these years before! Surely, Ishmael could not have been as magnanimous towards his father as Reeve Lindbergh was! Surely, Ishmael could not have found anything positive in his father's spineless and cowardly behaviour!

There is, however, good news in this story. And the good news is that it does tell about a loving father – albeit that the loving father was not the human father in the story. No, the loving father in this story is none other than God himself, the heavenly Father. And that because, despite the envy and cowardice of God's chosen ones, Abraham and Sarah, God pledged that he would look after Hagar and Ishmael who had been cast out into the desert. Though his servants abandoned them, he would not.

And God was true to his word. When Hagar and Ishmael found themselves in trouble out there in the desert, when they ran out of food and water, and they began to cry because they thought they were going to die. God heard them crying and said, "What are you troubled about, Hagar? Don't be afraid. God has heard the boy crying. Get up, go and pick him up, and comfort him. I will make a great nation out of his descendants."⁹ Yes, though Hagar and Ishmael found themselves in the most desperate of situations, though they had been the victims of the sinfulness and weakness of others, the good news was they still had a loving Father looking after them.

Today in 2010 that is still good news. Each and every one of us, no matter who we are, has a loving heavenly Father looking after us. And it's especially something we must celebrate on this Father's Day. No matter what our fathers are like or were like, good or bad, strong or weak, loving or unfeeling, we still have a loving heavenly Father who looks after us and cares for

us every day of our lives, even in the worst of situations.

Writing in the *United Methodist Reporter*, a New York woman, Judy Harkness, tells about being homeless some years ago after divorce and losing her job. "I sat in my car, my only home, with my six children, trying to sleep," she writes. "We had no bathroom. There was no kitchen to cook a hot meal, no living room to sit back and watch TV." Their meals came mostly from garbage cans in the back of markets or from soup kitchens. Their only income came from collecting bottles and cans to return for deposit.

"I felt so all alone and confused," Judy recalls. "I had no family who would let us stay with them and friends just seemed to disappear overnight. But when I felt myself slipping and giving way to my hate I grabbed my Bible and read, I talked to God as if He were sitting beside me." Once Judy believed she heard God speaking words of comfort to her, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Suddenly she became aware of the fact that God was just like a father looking after her. And she felt his love in her life. "I knew in my heart that He really loved me and my children," she wrote. "There were times I felt His arms around me as I cried and called on His name for help."¹⁰

On this Father's Day, as we recognise and show appreciation to our human fathers and grandfathers, let us remember that we have another father, a heavenly Father, one who is with us no matter where, no matter when. One who constantly holds us in his arms, in the warm embrace of his love and who cares for us in the good times and the bad.

Today is a day of celebration of fathers but, above all, it is a celebration of the Father above all fathers. Today is a celebration of the Fatherhood of God.

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¹ Bill Cosby, *Fatherhood*, Doubleday, 1986; Brett Blair, "The Role of the Father", *eSermons.com*

² Bryan Robinson, "Dr. Huxtable vs. Mr. Cosby: Who Is the Real Bill Cosby?", ABC News, February 25, 2005

³ Reeve Lindbergh, *Under A Wing: A Memoir*, A Delta Book, New York 1998

⁴ Genesis 16:1-15

⁵ Genesis 16:2

⁶ Genesis 21:1ff

⁷ Genesis 21:10

⁸ Genesis 21:14

⁹ Genesis 21:17,18 As Isaac became the ancestor of the Israelite people, Ishmael, of course, became the ancestor of the Arab people.

¹⁰ King Duncan, "Confused But Not Forgotten", www.eSermons.com Adapted.