

Lent 4

*'And call no one your father on the earth for you have one father
- the One in heaven.'* Matthew 23 v9

6 3 16

Merciful Lord,
absolve your people from their offences,
that through your bountiful goodness
we may be delivered from the chains of sin
which by our frailty we have committed.

My text for Mothering Sunday may be found in the gospel according to Matthew chapter 23 and verse 9: *'And call no one your father on the earth for you have one father - the One in heaven.'*

You may be aware that, this Lent, I'm trying, in a series of six sermons, to tackle some difficult texts, verses from the Bible that are hard to get our head round. Today, Mothering Sunday, Mothers' Day in the UK, I thought it appropriate we might like to consider the idea that we call no man father !

Well, we all have mums and dads and we all owe our parents so much. Sadly, both my mum and dad are now dead but, when they were alive, I was happy to call one my mum and the other my dad. My father, Thomas Randall, loved me in a way that made me feel good to be alive, valued, of worth. I was his youngest son, his youngest child, and I do hope I made him proud of me by what I did and how I

respected him. I never actually called him father but rather dad or daddy but he was my father and if anyone asked me about my father, it was of him I thought.

So, today, we have a problem here when Jesus is teaching us not to call anyone in this life father. Since we all necessarily do have fathers what does Jesus really mean? To understand anything properly, you need to be aware of the context. And here, in chapter 23, Matthew is recording a moment in time when Jesus is being critical of, having a go at the Pharisees who set themselves up as the gold standard of right interpretation when it came to understanding scripture. So three times Jesus says don't: don't call anyone teacher; don't call anyone instructor; don't call anyone father. Why? Because God is truly the one who instructs us; God is our real teacher; God is our real, spiritual father. What Jesus is actually saying in saying don't is more about us getting our head round who is really actually there for us – and that is God our Father in heaven, Abba, as Jesus calls him, which isn't the name of a pop group but the Aramaic word for daddy.

Oh, and by the way, some priests are indeed called father. I said when I came here ten years ago, I said to folk at St Bart's you can call me Father Gareth and one of the congregation, a great mate of mine called John Marshall, honestly said to me 'I'm sorry – I can't call you father – but you are my brother in Christ. And I loved it, loved him, because what he was saying he was saying with respect and I respected him for it. Most French people call me Révérend and I'm more than happy to be greeted with a smile of friendly recognition on the street in Dinard. What you call someone is not so important as the tone in which you say it.

So this morning, on Mothers' Day, let me leave you with the challenge of making sense of the text that tells us to call no man father, let me leave you with the challenge of seeing what Jesus is actually saying when he is being literally challenging.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

6th March, 2016

G: Sermons 33 : Lent 4

