

31st SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (November 5, 2023)

Our readings almost have a sort of ‘Father’s Day’ feel, don’t they? Malachi asks ‘have we not all the one father...the one God [who] created us?’ Jesus told the crowds not to call anyone on earth their father since they “have but one Father in heaven.” These readings do help us think about what it means to call God our “Father”. First, however, a brief word about Jesus’ words: “call no one on earth your father”. This verse is often used by our non-Catholic brethren to challenge our custom of referring to priests as “Father”. This is a good example of Jesus’ use of hyperbole—the use of exaggeration to make a point. For one thing, Jesus could not have meant that statement literally; otherwise, we could never call our male parent ‘father’...and that would make no sense. To refer to a priest as ‘father’ simply speaks of his role as shepherd of his flock whose authority is based on his service to those for whom he is priest. If a priest ever does become controlling or authoritarian, then he is like those scribes and Pharisees who Jesus criticized so strongly for their hypocrisy. Please pray for all of us priests that we will be the loving and generous shepherd-leaders that we are called and ordained to be!

Back to the fatherhood of God: in addition to these readings, we also remember how Jesus taught his disciples and us to pray by praying to “Our Father who art in heaven” as we do at every Mass and elsewhere. And right after this homily we will again profess our faith in “one God, the Father almighty”. Some claim that a belief in God as Father is simply a cultural reflection of human fatherhood, as if the latter came first. In fact, it is just the opposite: human fatherhood is a reflection of the fatherhood of God—and a very faint reflection at that! The fatherhood of God goes way beyond our human understanding; he is the one and only creator and origin of all life. We humans, male and female as we are, we simply cooperate with God’s creative power through human procreation and birth. That’s why we say that human fatherhood is but a faint reflection of the Fatherhood of God.

There is yet more to say about knowing God as ‘Father’. Consider the word Jesus actually used: in everyday life he and his disciples spoke Aramaic, and the Aramaic word used by Jesus was ‘Abba’, translated into English as “father”. But scholars tell us that a more accurate translation of ‘abba’ would be something like ‘papa’ or ‘daddy’—what a child who loves and trusts his father would call him. So “Abba” implies a relationship of tenderness and complete love and trust...just how God relates to us and how we want us to relate to him. The Jewish people of that time had such a reverential, awe-filled sense of God that they wouldn’t presume to even pronounce the divine name revealed to Moses. Now Jesus calls God his Father, his ‘Abba’, implying that most intimate kind of father/son relationship with God—no wonder the scribes and Pharisees were so scandalized!

And what’s even more amazing: Jesus invites us into that same kind of relationship. As St. Paul told the Romans, we have received a spirit of adoption ‘through which we cry out, ‘Abba!’ (that is, ‘Father’)’ (Romans 8:15). How mind-boggling that is! God who has no beginning or end, who created the universe out of nothing, besides whom we are less than specks of dust...this same God through his Son invites us and longs for us to approach him as Father, as “Abba”, as “papa”. Simply amazing!

But there are those who have trouble thinking about God as loving Father, as ‘Abba’. Many of us were blessed in our growing-up years with our Dad’s presence at home who loved and provided for us the best he could. Others, however, may not have known that blessing...and from their own sadness they might well ask: “How can I see God as a loving Father when my own father walked out on us when I was growing up, or when he hurt me by his actions or his words, or when he ignored me and didn’t even seem to know I was there?” To any who might ask these questions, my heart and my prayers go out to you, even if I can’t know the depth of your hurt. But please know this: our Father God is infinite love, mercy, and tenderness. Whatever good you did not receive from your earthly father, you do and will receive from your heavenly Father—and way more besides. Remember: earthly fatherhood is but the faintest reflection of the Fatherhood of God, and sometimes that human reflection is dimmed or distorted because of poor or wrong choices that were made. The best thing you can do for your dad? Pray for him, whether he is living or if he has died—especially in this month of November when we remember and pray for all who have died. No matter what your father did that was wrong or didn’t do what was right, prayer is the greatest and most powerful act of charity available to us.

One brief story to conclude: a young couple had a little boy who really looked forward to his dad coming home from work each day. They would play together, and you could tell they really loved each other. One day the boy’s mother told him what she thought was good news: “you’re going to have either a little sister or a little brother. Isn’t that wonderful?” The boy frowned and hung his head, and after a moment replied: “Not a sister. A brother. And he better bring his own daddy.” Don’t you love it?! The tenderness, the love, and the trust that that boy knew from his daddy is available to every one of us from our heavenly Father, and infinitely more so. How utterly and undeservedly blessed and privileged we are to be called his children!