**Dad’s Support Group Talks**

Encouragement

My father-in-law is a massive Formula One fan, so when we go over to his house, I often find myself on the sofa watching a race. As a novice, it's the pitstop that makes me sit up, and the frantic flurry to get the car back on the road.

Looking back to the first year of my son’s life, I find myself identifying with those unnamed mechanics. Our first children were twin daughters, so inevitably I’d been very involved in their first year. But with my son, I felt surplus and disconnected. Because my wife was breastfeeding and was with him 24/7, she seemed to be all he needed or wanted. After two daughters, I'd expected this amazing father-son bond, but he definitely preferred mummy. In Formula One terms, she was the Ferrari, I was the little guy with the wet wipe who occasionally cleaned the driver’s visor.

What helped me understand my distinctive contribution as a father were some words from the early church leader, Paul, writing to some young Christians: *“we dealt with each of you as a* ***father*** *deals with his own children,* ***encouraging****,* ***comforting*** *and* ***urging*** *you to live lives worthy of God.”*

As a dad, what I bring particularly to the party of parenthood is the gift of encouragement - first for my partner but also for my child. What every child needs from their dad is encouragement - by which I mean the kind of words that God spoke to Jesus at his baptism - to say to our children *“You’re my child, whom I love. With you I am well pleased”.* Some of us will have known that kind of encouragement regularly from our fathers, and the strength it gave us growing up. Others of us may have longed for it and never quite received it. The point is even if we can’t give our babies breast-milk or kangaroo care or the kind of quantity time our partners can, we can give them en-**courage**-ment – communicating to them that we love them, we believe in them and therefore they can face anything. As a Christian, that’s what God my Father gives to me. And as fathers, it’s what all of us can give to our children – when they're tiny, through smiles and eye contact and attention; as they get older through words of affirmation and praise; all the way through by our warm, steady presence with them in life – as Paul says, encouraging, comforting and urging.

Compassion

I’m sure we’ve all played those word association games. Say the word ‘vegetable’ and 70% of people will think of a carrot. I wonder what words we associate with fatherhood. Maybe positive words like strength, sacrifice, hard work. Maybe negative words like distant, authoritarian or Homer Simpson.

Well I was struck this week by a line in the Bible that says this: *“As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.”* And what struck me was that linking of fatherhood and compassion – because I wouldn’t instinctively associate them.

In our culture, we tend to think of ‘compassion’ as a feminine virtue. We think that being soft is the opposite of being strong – unless we’re talking about loo paper. But when King David wrote those words 3000 years ago and wanted to picture how God feels about us, he thought of the compassion of a father for his children. Compassion, empathy, that way that we feel our hearts pulled out of us by the weakness and helplessness of our child – that is the very essence of fatherhood.

Now we may not respond to our baby’s cries in exactly the same way that our partners do. We probably don’t start lactating. And it may be that fatherly love takes a little longer to emerge. But I’m told by people who research these things that fathers are just as empathetic to their children as mothers, and that a child’s ability to show empathy and compassion (particularly boys) is closely linked to quality time with their dads, cuddling them when they’re tiny (and not so tiny), comforting them when they’re scared, holding their hands as they take their first steps out into the big wide world.

Becoming a dad changes us emotionally. I now cry in movies. But that’s not a mark of weakness. It’s a sign of growth. *“As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.”*

Love

Parents always love their kids, don’t they? Sadly we know that isn’t true and even ‘good dads’ can struggle to love their children. There’s this expectation that the moment we set eyes on our babies, our hearts will burst with overflowing love for them. But the reality is often quite different. We can feel disconnected from our newborns, at least initially. We can feel that we’ve somehow lost our partner, almost a bit jealous of all the attention baby gets. And we can resent all the restrictions and discomforts a baby inflicts on us – sleep-less nights, evenings stuck at home, holidays stuck in the UK (come to think of it, a lot like lockdown only for 18 years).

All other loves (marriage, friendship, community, sports teams) give you something in return (apart from supporting Everton). Early stage parenting is 100% sacrifice. But then that’s precisely what makes it the most genuine sort of love, and maybe why the Bible so often pictures God as bring like a father or a mother. There’s a quote that puts it like this: *“This is love – not that we loved God but that he first loved us and sent his Son to be the sacrifice for sins.”*

Now you don’t have to be a Christian to get something of the force of that. True love isn’t about me and what I get out of it. It’s about the other person and what I can give them. Becoming a dad brought home to me that so much of my ‘love’ was actually self-serving – about me being loved and accepted back. But true love (for a Christian that means God’s love) is different. It’s not about give and take, but give and give. It’s not about me staying the most important person in my world (which, let’s face it, is how we naturally think of life) but me surrendering that place to someone else. And amazingly what we discover as we do that is a new kind of happiness and fulfilment we never knew before.

Wonderfully made

A couple of days ago someone (who doesn’t have any children) asked me “Do your children take after *you* or *your wife*?” It’s a classic question. The moment the baby pops out, everyone seems to have an opinion about who they look like. *“Oh, they’ve got your ears… Oh, they’ve got her hair…”* But in my experience the older my children have got, the more *unique* I realise they actually are.

So, yes there are those superficial similarities between the generations. I’m thrilled that my three daughters have their mother’s beautiful eyes. I’m less thrilled that my son shares my inability to admit mistakes. But the truth is each child is very different from their siblings (even our identical twins) and very different from me and my wife.

In the words of King David in the Bible, each of us is *“fearfully and wonderfully made”,* created unique in the image of God. You don’t need to be a Christian believer to see the sense in that. As parents it’s so important we realise that our children are not carbon-copies of us, not our mini-mes; that for all the things they have picked up from us (good and bad, by nature and by nurture) they are different from us, their own individuals. And our job therefore as parents is not to be architects or potters, creating and forming our children to be just like us, but shepherds and gardeners, tending and nurturing our children as they grow into the unique people God has made them to be.

And actually that’s tremendously exciting, because it means our children are not limited by our imaginations and life experiences. I hope I’m not one of those dads that goes around boasting about his amazing children but they do constantly surprise me with the things they say, the passions they grow, the abilities they develop, the characters they are. And even with these little ones we’ve got here, I’m sure there are times when you gaze at your child and echo those words of King David – that they are *“fearfully and wonderfully made”.* And the great adventure of parenting is discovering that truth more and more as they grow.

The Prodigal Father

I wonder how you want to be remembered by your children. I hit 50 next month so I’m growingly aware that I have a sell-by date, after which the world will happily continue spinning without me. And the only people likely to remember me 50 years from now are my children. So what will they remember?

There are definitely things I hope they don’t remember – my grumpiness through much of lockdown, the way much of the time I'm not interested in my phone than them. And there are definitely things I hope they do remember – their fourth birthday party when I dressed up as CBeebies gardener Mr. Bloom, or the first time I read them the Hobbit.

But the way I’d love to be remembered would be summed up by a single verse from Jesus’ most famous parable – the Prodigal Son. We probably know the story – a dad who’s done everything for his two sons but both of them in different ways end up alienated from him – the younger son is the classic rebel, spending all he has on wild living; the older son is outwardly respectable but inside seethes with resentment and entitlement.

But dropped in the middle of the story is a single verse that sums up the father’s reaction when his younger son comes home: *“When he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him”.* It’s a picture of reckless, heedless love – as this dignified old man throws caution to the wind, ignores the frowns of the neighbours and his own hurt pride and hurls himself headlong into the arms of his son.

Jesus of course is trying to give us a picture of God’s love for us, but at the same time it takes us right to the heart of what it means to be a father. It’s to love unconditionally, even when our kids get it badly wrong. It’s to love passionately: this son could have no doubts about how his father felt about him. It’s to love publicly – to take delight in our children and for them to know we are proud to be their father. I don’t know if this is how my children will remember me, but I know this is how I’d love to be remembered by them.