

St. Mary's Sermons

Ephesians 1:3-14

Adoption.

Some of the stuff that Paul writes in his letters is just simply mind blowing. This morning's passage, from Ephesians chapter one, is a very good example of this. There is so much going on in these few verses that it is difficult to know where to start. As so often Paul begins by praising our majestic God. In particular he thanks God that before the universe was even formed, he chose us to be part of his family. Someone has said that while there are many unplanned pregnancies there are no unplanned adoptions.

One of the key themes of this lovely passage then is that of adoption. It might come as a bit of a shock when I tell you that in the writing of St Paul the theme of adoption is a much more prominent one than the theme of being "born again." Paul in fact uses the word adoption five times in all. Yet throughout the history of the church and in particular the evangelical wing, we have tended to emphasise the need to be "born again". Sadly these days the concept of being "born again" has become a bit of a cliché that has been widely misunderstood and misused. At one time even a car was said to have been born again. I know exactly what they meant: that the car had undergone a major makeover and had been redesigned in order to improve its looks and its efficiency, but it always seemed to me to be a very strange use of the term.

Please don't misunderstand me I'm not suggesting for one minute that we are wrong to talk about the need for everyone to be "born again", after all the saying originated from the lips of Jesus himself. What I am suggesting is that it is not the only language that we can use to describe our relationship with God and that we have failed to appreciate just what an important, key theme adoption is in Pauline thought. I hope this morning to show just what a helpful way of describing our relationship with God this is and to explain what some of the benefits for us of using this sort of analogy might be.

I am not even going to attempt to pronounce the Greek word that Paul uses here, but simply say that it literally means "to make someone a son". Paul clearly had in mind the Roman process of adoption, which he would have been very familiar with. It is an amazingly simple picture to understand but at the same time it is also a very profound way of demonstrating just what God has done for us and what it means to be a Christian.

The normal practice in the Roman world, which Paul is referring to here, was that a childless couple would adopt the son of a family of slaves from their own estate. This actually benefited both parties. The son of the slave would be set free from an often precarious life of poverty and servitude while the adopting parents would be set free from the stigma of not having a son and heir.

This process usually took place in two stages. The first stage involved the symbolic selling of the slave's son to the adopting father. This was done three times. At the end of the third sale the child was deemed to no longer be under his biological father's authority but under his adopting father's control. The second stage involved the adoption being ratified by a magistrate which sealed the deal.

It is easy to apply this illustration to our faith. Until Jesus came we were all in bondage to sin, we were all children of the father of lies whom the bible calls satan. On the cross Jesus paid the full price for our redemption, not of course in gold or silver but in his precious blood. As a direct result of this anyone who is prepared to renounce his old way of life and put their trust in Jesus will be adopted by abba father and transferred into his kingdom becoming his sons and daughters and co heirs with Christ.

The reason then why Paul was so keen to talk about our relationship with God in terms of adoption is because he clearly understood the immense benefits of being adopted.

It might seem somewhat obvious to us but the child who was adopted received a new father and a new family. Not only that, he or she was he given a new future, they were also given a new fortune but perhaps most importantly of all, they were also given a new freedom. An adopted son was given the same status as a natural son and so he stood to inherit everything that the natural son would do.

When we think about our spiritual adoption as sons of God then the ramifications soon become very apparent. When someone chooses to turn their back on the old way of life and become a follower of Jesus they are not just set free from their slavery to sin, they are legally adopted as sons or daughters of our heavenly father. We benefit enormously by all of this. We

inherit these benefits not when we died but when Jesus died. In other words **NOW!**

Firstly, we have a new father. This new father is not just any old father but as we have already seen when we looked at the parable of the prodigal, simply the greatest, most extravagantly generous, loving father that anyone could ever wish to have.

Secondly, we inherit a new family. Again this is not just any old family but the largest family in the whole world, made up of some 2 billion adopted brothers and sisters from right across the globe. Incidentally while we are talking about our Christian brothers and sisters it grieves me intensely when we shoot ourselves in the foot by failing to love each other in the way that we should, especially when we are unnecessarily critical and judge one another. It is so easy to do and we often don't realise just how hurtful these sorts of comments can be. Jesus clearly warned us about just how foolish this sort of behaviour is in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 7. When we react like this then we behave just like the hypocritical older brother in the parable.

3rdly, we receive numerous spiritual blessings, not least of which is that our previous debt is completely cancelled. And finally we have a new freedom. All the chains of the past are no longer able to hold us and we can enjoy the glorious liberty of being the children of God. We are free to live life to the full just as God intended. God completely transform us and gives us a new identity. I could not help but think of that lovely Wesley hymn we sang last week. My chains fell off my heart was free. No condemnation now I dread Jesus and all in him is mine.

When we understand the full benefits of being adopted into our Heavenly father's family it seems astonishing that we have not been more keen to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to hear and respond to this wonderful news. There is only one reason I can think of why this has not happened. And that is although we know all this in theory we have not truly let its reality sink into our hearts, we have not allowed ourselves to experience this first hand. Everything necessary for our adoption has been achieved by Jesus on the cross but we desperately need the witness of the spirit if we are to fully appreciate what it means for us to be adopted children of our heavenly father.

Much more we could say about what it means for us to be adopted into God's family, only just skimmed the surface this morning. My prayer is that we will rediscover the buried treasure, this theme of adoption and restore it to its rightful place in our theology. I think it is a particularly helpful way of describing our faith to the increasing number of people who have never experienced the love of their earthly father, helping them to know that they are loved by their father God and are part of his family.