

## Father and Mother God

Readings: Psalm 91, Matthew 23:37 - 39

On 18 February 1999 the Independent News released a shocking news item.

It went like this:

For centuries Christians have prayed to God the Father, but now a new Methodist worship book has moved with the times - and decided to call God Mother.

The controversial prayer, which addresses God "our Father and our Mother", makes the Methodists the first mainstream Christian denomination in this country to depart from the traditional language used to describe God in its liturgy.

The Methodists claim there is nothing radical in calling God Mother, referring to descriptions by the 14th-century English writer, Julian of Norwich, and Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 66, which says: "as one whom his mother comforteth, so I shall comfort you".

And the shocking prayer? Here it is:

God our Father and our Mother,  
we give you thanks and praise  
for all that you have made,  
for the stars in their splendour  
and the world in its wonder  
and for the glorious gift of human life.  
With the saints and angels in heaven  
we praise your holy name.

At the launch of the worship book, Rev Neil Dixon stressed that God was neither male nor female. "God is not a person. God is spirit and without gender. The fact that we've used male imagery so extensively has in a sense reinforced the picture of God as a man, and the fact that Jesus is male has

done that as well but, if all human beings are created in God's image, feminine as well as masculine attributes must reflect God's nature," he said.

Is he right? Why then have we traditionally used male language when referring to God?

### **Male language**

1. The name 'Father' is used to describe one person of the Godhead, 'Son' another. Those names begin to describe the relationship between two persons of the Trinity. To get away from gender specific titles some use the terms: 'Creator, Redeemer and Lifegiver'.
2. Some fear that the term 'mother' undermines the doctrine that God created the world from nothing – if Mother created the universe, that means she gave birth to it so it came from her body rather than being created from scratch.
3. The vast majority of writers of the Scriptures were male.
4. Goddesses were a problem in the times of the First (Old) Testament and the New Testament. Most ancient Near Eastern societies had a goddess as the main cult figure or as a partner to a male god—Asherah in Canaan, Isis in Egypt, Tiamat in Babylon.
5. Jesus came to earth as a baby boy – he could have been a girl child but in that patriarchal society, he wouldn't have stood a chance of being listened to.
6. Jesus told us to address God as 'Our Father'. The emphasis is on the relationship close relationship of parent to child – intimacy and immediate access were the point Jesus was making, not that God is male.

As far as I can see, all language is fraught. It is inadequate. (Ever tried to tell a joke to someone whose first language is different to yours?) It is incomplete and it is liable to be misunderstood. That is why feminists refuse to call God 'Father'. Some people have been distant from or abused by their father; to call God 'Father' for them is unhelpful or even painful in the extreme.

I want to present a few fairly random feminine images of God in Scripture.

### **God as wisdom**

What feminine images would you think of?

People often think that nurturing is the most obviously feminine trait in the Lords' personality. However as our understanding of good parenting grows, we know that Father's are also very good nurturers.

One feminine image is that wisdom. The Greek word for wisdom is Sophia. In Scripture wisdom is often personified as a woman and praised lavishly especially in Proverbs chapters 1 – 9. 'All the things you may desire cannot compare with her' (3:15), for "she is a tree of life" (3:18), and her "fruit is better than gold" (8:19). Wisdom cries out in the streets, especially encouraging the "simple" and "scoffers" to gain deeper understanding (1:20-23; 8:1-6)

The wisdom referred to is clearly the wisdom that comes from God and is passed to those who will listen. So while the society was patriarchal, it wasn't blind to at least one of God's good characteristics that could be labelled 'female'.

### **God as protector**

Some say Psalm 91 is about David the King. Others say it is written by Moses. Whether either of those versions are correct, the song certainly contains so many great promises of protection, safety, nurture, honour even. It is full of pictures of the things the Lord offers – rest, refuge, safety, rescue, shelter, victory. One of the loveliest images is in verse four: protection is offered for the vulnerable one from predators. The mother bird offers her wings for protection and the chicks move there to receive that protection.

Listen to a New Zealand Aotearoa version of the Psalm:

We live in the shelter created by God.  
God is like a great bird that gathers us  
under her wing.  
If we are trapped God frees us.  
If we are sick God heals us.  
If we are afraid God strengthens us.  
If we are threatened God protects us.  
God's messengers look out for us.  
They support us in difficult times.  
To know God's name is to walk in confidence.

I love that finish; "To know God's name is to walk in confidence".

God's names reveal God's truth, God's character – who God is and how God acts. What names do you call God?

Jesus calls on Psalm 91 to describe God's great love for Jerusalem:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Your people have killed the prophets and have stoned the messengers who were sent to you. I have often wanted to gather your people, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.

You can hear the anguish in Jesus' voice. You catch a glimpse of God our great Father and Mother longing for the little ones to come for protection. And yet they won't come. Jesus goes on:

But you wouldn't let me.

And he describes the consequences that come with not accepting God's protection:

And now your temple will be deserted. You won't see me again until you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

Only those who respond in faith and recognise the One who comes in the name of the Lord will see him again. Only they will find ultimate protection.

Whose read *The Shack* by Wm Paul Young? . Mack, the hero's small child has been murdered. Mack receives a note in his mailbox from "Papa", saying that he would like to meet with Mack at the shack. Mack has had no relationship with his abusive father for years. His wife calls God "Papa". Could the note be from God? Mack goes to the shack and meets God in the form of a black woman; struggling to make sense of what was happening in an early encounter...

"You must know" he offered, calling you Papa is a bit of a stretch for me."

"Oh really?" She looked at him in mock surprise. "Of course I know. I always know." She chuckled. "But tell me why do *you* think it's hard for you? is it because it's too familiar for you, or maybe because I'm showing myself as a woman, a mother or..."

"No small issue there," Mack interrupted with an awkward chuckle.

"Or, maybe it's because of the failures of your *own* papa?"

Mack gasped involuntarily. .... He sought for safe footing, but was only partially successful, finally answering through gritted teeth, "Maybe, its because I've never known anyone I could really call Papa."

At that she put down the mixing bowl that had been cradled in her arm and, leaving the wooden spoon in it, she turned toward Mack with tender eyes. She didn't have to say it; he knew she understood what was going on inside of him, and somehow he knew she cared about him more than anyone ever had. "If you let me Mack, I'll be the Papa you never had."

At that point of the story Mack isn't prepared to let God love him completely whether God presents as male or female.

We can't box God in can we? There is so much of the Lord to know and the Holy One's self-revelation is unique to each one of us. God's character is so deep and so wide that we can only grasp tiny aspects at any time. The Lord knows what we need, when we need it and Gods' self-revelation is perfect for that.

Sure we need to check our understanding of God at times. God never acts contrary to the written Word of God. God's revelation in Jesus Christ is the most complete revelation we have.

And Jesus called God 'Father'. I use "Father" most often even though it is not a perfect name for God. For me it comes the closest to describing how I relate to this God who is the best parent I will ever know. But God has many names and it is good to use them – each name portrays something different about God's character.

Understanding that God encompasses the absolute best characteristics of male and female is more important than what we call the One who is above all and in all.

Perhaps it is irreverent to say "call me anything but don't call me late for dinner". Names do denote character so some care is in order. My mother used to say "Old J C." I couldn't cope with that title now.

For me the answer doesn't lie in caving into the norm and always calling God by masculine terms. Rather it lies in discovering the vast richness that is God. What characteristics describe the nature of the One who loves us more than anyone else ever could? How can I use some of those names to uncover more about the relationship this One and I are forming together?