

I've had two thoughts running through my head this week. It might not sound much, but actually that's a good week for me. Two things I've been thinking about quite a lot and I've thought they've been running along parallel tracks, as I considered them early in the week and they're both addressed in the readings, the rather complex readings that we just heard this morning. And for several days I couldn't see how these two thoughts were related and I felt that I was gonna have to preach just on one and I couldn't work out which one it was.

But the novelist Alice Walker helped me to bring them together so that my parallel lines of thinking joined. So you're going to hear them both today and find out how it is that these two tracks of thought became related.

So the first track was this. I've been thinking about the name of God and this was stimulated by a class I taught last Saturday. I teach at the Diocese and School for Ministry in Ocean Beach, which I enjoy and this week the subject was feminist theology and it's a very good, bright group of students and we had a great conversation. It got me thinking all week. And we read a theologian who decided to abandon Christianity because she concluded that the Christian faith is hopelessly patriarchal and her main evidence for this was that in the Christian tradition, God is named Father and because of that, God is only seen as being masculine with all the stereotypically male characteristics of being powerful, stern, distant, and dominant. So she decided that she could no longer call herself a Christian.

But as a group we took issue with her and found another way. We looked at other texts and studied what the Bible says and we came to a different conclusion. One of the key texts in our discussion was that reading from Exodus that we heard from the Old Testament. And this is important in this context because this is one of the main places in the Bible which is concerned about the name of God.

God appears to Moses in the burning bush and gives Moses this unexpected message. He says, "You, Moses, are going to lead my people out of slavery." And Moses thinking ahead says, "What shall I say? Who shall I say sent me? What name shall I use?" Because he probably realized that telling people a voice from a burning bush had told him might not be that convincing. And the divine voice from the bush says, "I am who I am. Say to the people of Israel, I am sent me to you."

Now that's probably not what Moses was expecting and rivers of ink have been spilt as to what this name actually means. But one thing is clear. That in this key moment in the Biblical story, God is identified and named in a way that's beyond gender, and of course we know that it's true. God is neither male nor female. God is I Am, who I Am.

Now when the Bible in the Christian tradition tries to speak of God we're forced to use the language of metaphor and sometimes, in fact many times, those metaphors are related to a gender, as with Father, but not always. The psalmist often talks about God as a rock, but we don't have male and female rocks. That's beyond gender. And in the psalm set for today, the psalmist talks about rejoicing under the shadow of your wing. Well I doubt there's anybody here that thinks God is a bird.

When we talk about God, we have to use the language of metaphor and Father is one of those metaphors, but actually it's not a dominate one in the Old Testament. It's not even common. It's only used 11 times in the Old Testament and not once, does anybody in the Old Testament, refer to God as Father in the context of prayer. It's in the gospels that the language of God the Father comes to the fore, and Jesus only calls God, Father in prayer. Whenever He prays to God, that's the only title He uses in that context. And He encouraged His followers to do the same and we'll soon be following that example as we say together the Lord's Prayer, which begins, Our Father.

And as many of you know, Jesus uses an unusual word for Father. It's Abba, in the original language, which isn't quite equivalent to daddy, but it's close. It's a similarly intimate term that's really only used in the context of a family. The Fatherhood of God is something that emerges in relation to the Sonship of Jesus. God is Father because Jesus is the Son. Jesus makes God fully known to us. In His ministry, we see the move from the Old Testament revelation of an enigmatic divine name to an encouragement to speak of God in person, relational, intimate terms, as Jesus invites us to call God, Father, Abba.

Jesus invites His followers into that relationship with God that He enjoys. That's what His ministry was about; calling others to know God as He knew God. His followers aren't encouraged to call God, King, Lord, Ruler because the followers of Jesus are called into a

much closer relationship; to know God in a different way. The relationship between a king and subject is very different to the relationship between a child and its Abba, Father.

So the second track, and you'll be pleased to know I haven't done quite as much thinking about this, the second track is repentance, and I suppose that Lent is a good time to be thinking about repentance, and my spiritual director gave me an article on contrition. Contrition in the Anglican tradition, and the gist of the article, was that there's not much of it about as there used to be.

There was a little boy called Jimmy who had trouble pronouncing the letter R. So his teacher, rather cruelly, gave him a sentence to practice at home: "Robert gave Richard a rap in the rib for roasting the rabbit so rare." A week later she said to Jimmy, "Have you got on with the sentence? Could you repeat it back to me?" He said sure and he rattled it off. "Bob gave Dick a poke in the side for not cooking the bunny enough." He evaded the letter R, and repentance is an R word that we too often seek to avoid, and Lent is a time to actually confront this subject of repentance.

It's a theme in today's reading. Twice, Jesus' says, "Unless you repent, you will all perish." There was a shoplifter once who got overcome with a guilty conscience and found he couldn't sleep because he was so troubled by what he'd done, so he sent a note to the store where he had stolen these goods from. It read thus: "Dear Sir, Please find the enclosed; a check for \$250 to cover the costs of the goods that I stole from your store. Yours, whatever. PS: If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest."

Now, that is not true repentance. There's a better image of repentance in the gospel with the image of the barren fig tree. It's a tree that wasn't bearing fruit. But rather than cutting it down, the gardener says, "Let me see what I can do. Give me time to prune it, dig around it, and put manure on it and we'll see what happens."

And Lent is a time for us to do that. To take stock. To see those bits of our life that aren't bearing fruit and prune the bits that have gone bad. This is a season of rigorous self-examination which should lead to confession, contrition, and repentance.

So those were the two tracks going through my mind earlier in the week, parallel tracks. Then I read this quote from the novelist Alice Walker who wrote this: "When I was a little girl, I accidentally broke a fruit jar. Several brothers and sisters were nearby who could have done it, but my father turned to me and asked, 'Did you break the jar, Alice?' Looking into his large, brown eyes, I knew he wanted me to tell the truth. I also knew he might punish me if I did. But the truth inside of me wanted badly to be expressed. 'I broke the jar' I said. The love in his eyes rewarded and embraced me. Suddenly I felt an inner-peace that I still recall with gratitude to this day."

And a penny dropped in my mind: Of course the two tracks of God's Fatherhood and repentance are related. They aren't parallel. They're related, because the person to whom we confess, well, it makes a difference who it is that we're confessing to. When we take time to reflect on our lives and repent of our sins, we confess not to a stern, distant father figure, but to a God who invites us to name Him Abba, who longs to forgive, who made us and loved us and wants to draw us into closer relationship to Him.

Amen.