

# MY FATHER'S TEARS

*The Cross and the Father's Love*

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## **Dedication**

To my Mum, Joy Stibbe

Eternally grateful for adopting me

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# Chapter 1

## The Gospel of the Heart

## Chapter 1: THE GOSPEL OF THE HEART

My brother says that he only ever saw our father cry on two occasions. The first was when dad's father died. The second was because of me.

To appreciate just why he shed tears this second time, I need to provide some back story.

My twin sister Claire and I were born to a single parent mother in Coventry in the autumn of 1960. We were placed in an orphanage in London and then subsequently adopted by Philip and Joy Stibbe. It is Philip Stibbe whom I'm referring to here. He was my adoptive father.

And he was a truly remarkable man.

Anyone who takes the bold risk to adopt a child is in my view remarkable, heroic even.

But he was also remarkable because of his personality and his experiences. He was without doubt the kindest man I have ever met, and the most patient and dignified. I know this may sound like the kind of romanticized emotion which is recollected in tranquility, but it's true. If you had known him you would have said the same. He had been through immense trials in World War Two - including three years as a prisoner of war at the hands of the Japanese in Burma - and had met some remarkable people, including C.S. Lewis with whom he had regularly dined when he was a student at Oxford.

Dad read English Literature at Oxford, enjoying two years prior to volunteering to serve in the Royal Sussex Regiment, then his final year after he had been liberated as a POW in 1945 and repatriated in the UK.

He wouldn't talk much about the terrible suffering he went through. He wrote an eloquent but typically understated

book about it all called *Return via Rangoon*<sup>1</sup>. This highly acclaimed testimony was his sole comment on his years of torment. It was his catharsis. No more needed to be said.

However, when I started to fall in love with English literature in my teens he did on one occasion open up a little more. I was walking the dogs with him in a country park in Norfolk. He was in his early sixties at the time and the onset of Parkinson disease had not yet been detected.

We began to talk about the English Romantic poets.

And he began to share about his time in Rangoon jail, when he must have passed through the gates of hell.

'The only thing that kept me going some days was the poetry I had memorized.'

'How do you mean?' I asked.

'I used to recite poetry when we went out on working parties from the prison.'

'Who was your favourite?'

'Wordsworth,' he answered.

'Where did your fondness for him come from?'

'It was during my time before going to Oxford. I was supposed to be reading Classics. Everything was geared up for that anyway. But I went to the Lake District and fell in love with Wordsworth and decided to read English Literature instead. I'm glad I did.'

And then he began to recite some lines as our boots squelched through the early January mud. On and on he went until he reached the conclusion:

*Nor wilt thou then forget*

*That after many wanderings, many years,  
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,  
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me  
More dear, both for themselves and thy dear sake.<sup>2</sup>*

As dad finished, he remained quiet for several minutes, as did I. He was not a man given to displays of emotion but I could tell that it had moved him deeply.

Later I received some comments from an MP who wrote to me about his time at Bradfield College, where dad taught English for twenty seven years.

'I'll never forget it,' the MP wrote, 'your father had been reading some Milton to us in an English lesson. He was sitting in his black gown at the front of the class. When he came to the end he became so affected by what he had read that he opened up his desk lid and took cover behind it for a few moments as he took out a handkerchief and recovered his poise.'

### **Making an Exhibition of Myself**

The second time my brother saw my father cry was at the end of a telephone call in 1979.

I had fallen in love with English literature and dad had been watching my growing interest with keen and increasingly misty eyes.

By the time I was sixteen I had published my first book - a collection of poems<sup>3</sup> - and by seventeen I had set my heart on reading English at Cambridge University.

I had taken my exams and been to my interviews and now we were all waiting.

Then one night in 1979 the phone in the study had started to ring. It was one of those black, Steepletone dial phones with a classic ring tone.

Mum picked up the receiver.

'It's for you,' she whispered to me, barely able to disguise her excitement.

'It's Trinity College,' she added softly in my ear as she passed by.

As I spoke to the tutor for admissions, my mother quietly shepherded the rest of the family to the study door.

'Thanks for letting me know,' I said to the man on the other end of the phone before placing the handset back in its cradle.

I turned around and walked out to the foot of the staircase in the hall.

'I've been awarded an exhibition to read English at Trinity,' I said.

I didn't see what happened next because I was in a daze.

But my father evidently couldn't stand.

He sat down on the stairs, according to my brother.

And it was there that Giles saw my father's tears, for the second and the final time in his life.

### **Our Story, God's Story**

I have written and spoken on many occasions about how influential my adoptive father was in my eventual discovery of the true nature of God's character<sup>4</sup>.

That discovery was caught more than taught.

I had not been a person of faith during my teenage years. In fact, I had balked at the institutional Christian religion of both the schools I attended between 1968 and 1979. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but most of the chaplains didn't exactly light up my soul with enthusiasm for Christianity. The God of their formal and very dry chapel services was the God of the far away - an absent Father who didn't seem to make any visits other than the one his Son had made at the nativity two thousand years ago. Other than that, his imminence was not expected and his transcendence was protected. His affections, if he had any, were hidden in scented wisps of mystery.

Then, to my amazement and the even greater amazement of my rebellious peers, I stumbled one evening upon the person of Jesus Christ and found that he was and is alive and well. More than that, I learned that Christianity was always meant to be relational more than religious and that God was intentional about friendship with us - so intentional in fact that Jesus Christ had gone to hell and back to bring us into the Father's affectionate embrace.

After years of experiencing God's remoteness, that was both subversive and overwhelming.

But even when I had encountered Jesus, I didn't really understand what he had tried to teach and indeed to show us about the Father.

I guess I had subconsciously believed the lie that God was like my earthly father - not my adoptive father, that is, but my biological father. At that time I knew nothing about him. I didn't know what his name was or what he had done for a job. He was a mystery to me - someone who had disappeared from the scene before my teenage mother gave birth to my twin sister and me. Living in the legacy of that prenatal narrative, I had done what so many do and projected the

unknown face of my earthly father onto the equally unknown face of my heavenly Father. My picture of God the Father was therefore impaired. I had effectively constructed him in my biological father's image.

It took a long time for that to be displaced by a more truthful God-image and it was not formal religion which did that but personal revelation. The truth is I came to see in quite a dramatic way that God is an immensely kind, long-suffering, loving and perfect Father. He is much more like my adoptive father than my biological father, although even saying that may be committing the error of transference. Our heavenly Father is, after all, so much holier and more affectionate than even our best earthly dads are. He is perfect, simple as that. Even Philip Stibbe wasn't perfect, and he would have been the first to admit that.

In the end it was an encounter with the Holy Spirit which took this picture of God as Father from my head to my heart. Through the Spirit of adoption, my heart was inflamed with a stunning and entirely new revelation:

*Thanks to what Jesus has done at Calvary we can come to see that God is the Father who has adopted us as his royal sons and daughters and with Spirit-ignited hearts we can know him relationally and speak to him personally.*

Looking at it now, I am sure that the priceless gift of my adoptive father was the single most important factor - outside of course of God himself - in me coming to this life-transforming understanding.

Dad never said anything to me about this kind of heavenly Father.

But he certainly modeled it.

And without his influence - so clearly orchestrated by the providential wisdom of God - I doubt whether I would ever have been able to have understood such things so profoundly or so permanently.

### **Rediscovering the Trinity**

Looking back over the course of my life, I can now see that encountering Jesus and experiencing the Holy Spirit were critical moments in my discovery of the divine Father.

Encountering Jesus was critical because it is hard to even conceive of knowing God as Father outside of Jesus Christ. It is still not really properly appreciated how original the *Abba* revelation is to Jesus. Only in Christianity is Jesus worshipped as the one and only Son of God. Only in the Judeo-Christian tradition is God revealed to be our loving heavenly Father. Jesus Christ is truly the Way to the Father. When a person meets Jesus, they discover the heart-warming truth that God is our affectionate *Abba*.

This alone, however, is not enough to make such a revelation a reality. The nature of Jesus as Son and the teaching of Jesus about God's Fatherhood are objective truths and we can come to assent to them intellectually. But something more is needed if we are to move from the realm of the objective to the subjective, from the propositional to the personal, from the cognitive to the affectionate.

That 'something more' is the work of the Holy Spirit.

When a person comes to faith in Christ they do so because the Holy Spirit has brought them to a sense of conviction that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God by nature, the Mediator between earth and heaven, the one who has brought us home into the arms of the Father.

This work of the Holy Spirit is what opens our hearts up to the reality that God is a Father who loves us with an everlasting love and that we are forever his sons and daughters by adoption.

This is because the primary ministry and task of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life is not only to show us who Jesus really is - the Son by nature - but to reveal to our spirits who we really are - chosen sons and daughters.

And so we cannot do without the Holy Spirit.

If the Second Person of the Trinity opens up a vision of the Father's heart, it is the Third Person of the Trinity who leads us into that heart in an embrace which sets in motion the possibility for transformation and liberation at every level of our lives.

To experience this is to experience the Trinity.

## Rediscovering Spiritual Adoption

In the development of my Trinitarian faith, one of the most significant moments was when I began to rediscover a much neglected Biblical metaphor, that of spiritual adoption. After more than ten years as a Christian, I had never heard a single sermon or talk on this subject. Converted into a strict, conservative evangelical Christianity, the emphasis was on justification. Never once did I hear my teachers or my peers talking about the glorious Pauline picture of our adoption in Christ. What took precedence was a legal narrative - a narrative in which God is judge, we are lawbreakers, but Christ's death had paid the punishment which satisfied the Father's demand for justice.

Then, one evening, I encountered what John Wesley called 'the loving Spirit of adoption.' Suddenly my eyes were opened. God is not primarily a judge. He's first and foremost an adopting, affectionate Father.

That changed everything.

I went back to the Scriptures and discovered that on five occasions the Apostle Paul had used the word *huiiothesia*, literally 'the placing of a son', translated in most versions as 'adoption.'<sup>5</sup>

Further research uncovered that Paul had been using a picture from the Roman world. He was a Roman citizen so Roman adoptions were familiar to him. When a Roman couple wanted to adopt a son, they did so because they wanted to continue the *pater familias*, the family tree on the husband's side. To preserve his legacy, the husband would very likely adopt the son of a slave in his own extended household.

The actual rite of an adoption involved two stages.

First, the adopting father would go with the enslaved father to a magistrate. They would take the potential adoptee - the young boy - with them. A sale would then take place. Three times the adopting father would purchase the enslaved child with gold and silver. After the third sale the transaction would be complete. All this would take place before seven witnesses.

Then the second stage would occur.

The magistrate would declare that the boy was now the actual heir of the new adopting father. He would decree that the boy was no longer under the *patria potestas* - the fatherly authority - of the enslaved father but under his new father's authority. He would also rule that all the boy's prior debts were now cancelled.

When I discovered this, my heart leaped. What a moving picture Paul had found, under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, to explain our salvation in Christ.

Before Christ came, we had been slaves. We had been in debt. We had been insecure. We had had no future.

But now that Christ had come, we have been bought out of slavery not through gold and silver but through his own precious blood. Consequently, we are no longer slaves but sons. We are no longer in debt but co-inheritors with Christ. We are adopted. We have a new Father, a new family, a new future.

When I rediscovered this forgotten truth, my whole perspective changed. The court that I had been taught about in the legal version of Christianity was in fact an adoption court! Thanks to Jesus, I had become an adopted son of God.

### **Models of the Atonement**

My encounter with the Spirit of adoption changed my theology as radically as my actual adoption had changed my life. From this moment on I could never read the Bible in the same way. Nor could I understand the Cross as I had done.

This is in no way to disparage or dismiss other ways of looking at the Cross. I have always believed that there is no single, central metaphor or model of the atonement in the New Testament but rather a kind of *assiette de gourmandize* - a wonderful array of colorful and nourishing options from which the believer can choose as she or he seeks to feed on the great benefits of Calvary.

In my view, there have always been at least five main metaphors of the atonement and these are sacrificial, commercial, martial, legal and political in character.

First of all, there is the sacrificial metaphor, rooted in the sacrifices in the Jewish Temple, in which Jesus becomes the sacrifice for our sins at Calvary. Christ's sacrifice, unlike the sacrifices of the Old Covenant, is permanent and universal. It is once and for all. Thanks to what Jesus Christ has done on the Cross, we can be forgiven, receive God's mercy, and experience at-one-ment with the Father.

Then secondly there is the commercial metaphor, rooted in the slave-markets of the first century, in which Jesus becomes the ransom for many. In this picture Jesus is the one who buys us out of slavery to sin and to the Law and brings us into the freedom of knowing God as his children. The price for this redemption is not gold or silver but Christ's precious blood, by which we are liberated from the devil's hold.

This brings us thirdly to the martial metaphor, rooted in the battlefield, in which Christ becomes our Victor through his death. Living a totally righteous life, Jesus took the full condemnation for our inability to keep the Torah. The

enemy has always been the one accusing us, condemning us for not measuring up. When the enemy orchestrated Christ's death, he orchestrated his own defeat. Thanks to Jesus taking our condemnation, we can now live with the glorious realization that there is no charge or accusation against us. The enemy has been defeated!

Mention of charges brings us to the legal metaphor, rooted in the law court, in which Christ's sacrificial death results in a 'not guilty' sentence. More than that, it results in the declaration that those who are now in Christ are 'in the right'. Thanks to Christ's death, a miraculous exchange has taken place. Christ receives all our unrighteousness in his body on the Cross. We receive his righteousness by faith. We therefore enjoy an unmerited pardon - a pardon that ends the hostility between us and God and brings us heavenly *shalom* or peace.

This reference to peace brings us to the fifth and final metaphor. This is political in nature. In this light, the Cross is seen to secure reconciliation not just vertically (with God) but horizontally (with each other). Through the blood of Christ, the dividing wall of hostility between nations (especially between Jew and Gentile) has been destroyed. What the politicians couldn't do, Christ did! Through his sacrificial death, Christ brings an end to historical enmities and creates a new humanity in which we all have access to the Father.

These five prevailing metaphors, however much they have been subjected to revisionist interpretations in recent decades, still have life for countless Christians.

But there is another metaphor which I believe has received precious little attention, and that is the metaphor of adoption. In this picture, Christ in his death pays the

price required for us to be rescued out of our orphan state - characterized by servitude and striving - and into the new and glorious position as the sons and daughters of our Father in heaven. Through the blood that he sheds at Calvary, our older Brother enters this alienated planet and does for us what we could not do for ourselves - leads us out of the orphanage to the Father's house.

This is a metaphor that is rooted in the home. It was exploited by the Apostle Paul with inspirational creativity. Looking at salvation history, he understood by revelation that God is the adopting Father whose Son paid the price for us to be set free from a life of slavery (the performance-based life of the spiritual orphan) so that we could enjoy the glorious freedom of the adopted sons and daughters of God.

This picture of adoptive love, I want to propose, is both an intimate and a vital metaphor. It is intimate because while all the other five metaphors are relational, the metaphor of adoption is *familial*. In this narrative, we become sons and daughters who know God with that same intimacy with which a Jewish child knows their *Abba*. We are welcomed into the family of the Trinity as daughters and sons.

And it is vital - both in the sense of 'living' and 'important' - because this is a metaphor that has life in a world like ours, where millions of children are aching for adoption and where on every continent human beings are pining because they have lacked the love of a father. In fact, I would argue that never has there been a more opportune or urgent time for reinstating the adoption metaphor.

### **The Gospel of the Cross**

All this is background for this present volume which I have called *My Father's Tears* (with apologies to John Updike<sup>6</sup>).

After over two decades speaking and writing about the Fatherhood of God I have come to the conclusion that there are many Christians who live with a deep-seated and agonizing sense of the remoteness of God. In too many eyes, the First Person of God is a distant Father, often an absent Father, sometimes even an abandoning Father. This has affected everything they believe, including what they believe about the Cross. This stands to reason if you think about it. How you picture God will radically influence how you understand what was going on at Calvary. If you picture God as a conquering king, then you will understand the Cross in militaristic terms. If you understand God as a judge, then you will understand the Cross in juridical terms. Theology - the God-concept and the God-image in your intellectual operating system - affects everything.

It is here that we come to the main point and purpose of *My Father's Tears*.

It is my conviction that we haven't paid anything like enough attention to the theology of God's Fatherhood. His affectionate, affirming, adoptive love is at the very epicenter of his nature. While there are many other names for God (such as Warrior, Judge and King), the title 'Father' is his Christian name. Only in the Bible is he revealed as a perfect, loving, heavenly Father. As has been pointed out many times before, Islam has ninety nine names for God but the one missing is 'Father.' *Abba* is the name on Jesus' lips alone. It should be on the Christian's lips too. Every morning we should be crying 'Abba, Father,' every night too.

This God-image and God-concept, once it has been truly embedded in the human soul, transforms our view of everything, including the Cross. If the primary truth about who God is the truth that he is an extravagantly self-giving adoptive Father - a Father who will do anything to draw orphans home into his

eternal embrace - then this has to impact the way we look at what was going on at Calvary. If the lens through which we look is the lens of the Father's love - what I call 'the Love of all loves' - then while we may respect other perspectives of the Cross, our view will be *familial*.

More than anything else it will focus on the way the human heart of Jesus endured the agony of abandonment by his Father at Calvary in order to lead us out of the orphanage into the healing warmth of the Father's embrace.

It will focus on the way God the Father suffered the searing pain of bereavement as he saw his Son suffer and die so that we could be led back from the far country into the eternal security of his house.

It will finally focus on the way the Holy Spirit makes these truths real in our hearts and turns us away from being religious slaves and towards our heart's true home - which is what the Bible calls 'sonship' (which includes daughters).

This, in a nutshell, is why I have written *My Father's Tears*. I want to propose that the Gospel will be most effectively communicated in this postmodern generation by those who see and describe the story of the Cross in terms which honour the Biblical picture of God as an adopting Father and us as spiritual orphans, separated from his love, but brought home by our older Brother's sacrifice.

My aim, therefore, is to show you your Father's tears.

It is to take you back to the event of the Cross and to try in my own finite and faltering words to show you what was going on between the Father and the Son, and the Son and his Father, at the Place of the Skull.

I am going to urge you to give attention to the Biblical revelation of God's Fatherhood and the neglected doctrine of adoption as you seek to understand and share the Gospel.

In the process, I am going to make an attempt at telling the same story - the story of the Cross - from an unfamiliar yet liberating angle.

I will show you the grieving Father and the abandoned Son and propose that in this excruciating picture we will find the Gospel for our fatherless generation.

This, I believe, is the heart of the Gospel.

When we rediscover it, we will find that it is the Gospel of the heart.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Tears from Heaven**

## **Chapter 2: TEARS FROM HEAVEN**

What happened in your soul when I started speaking in the last chapter about God as Father?

Did you rage against such talk?

Did you rail against the very notion of a God trapped within such paternalistic and masculine language?

Or did it tap into a primal wound?

Did you have a sigh in your heart and say to yourself, 'I long to know God in this way but I don't understand what it means to be fathered like this?'

Or did you sneer at the idea?

Did you resist the very notion of God, driven by an inner compulsion to deny that this Father even exists?

Did you want to go beyond atheism to anti-theism - to believing against the very idea of the Father?

Or did you sense an inner resonance, a sense of fit, a heartwarming connection?

Did your heart sing at the very word, 'Father'?

### **When Metaphors Die**

Having spoken and written on this subject for nearly a quarter of a century I have come to realize that there are countless people for whom the very idea of God's Fatherhood is deeply problematic.

To some it is even a stumbling block - a seemingly intractable obstacle to intimacy with God.

There are many reasons why this might be but the most common is the one I mentioned in the last chapter. Most of us

tend to project the faces of our own flawed fathers onto God. This proclivity towards transference leads to defective images and concepts of God. So, for example:

If you had an angry father, you may conceive of God as volatile, unpredictable, stern and quick to anger.

If you had a father who abandoned you, you may feel that you can't quite trust God not to do the same.

If you had a father who abused you, you may see God as a Father whose touch you'd rather avoid at any cost.

If you had a father who didn't keep his promises to you, you may come to believe that God isn't trustworthy.

If you had a father who was stingy, you may have problems with the idea of God's lavish generosity.

If you had a father who was sick and weak you may find it difficult to picture a strong, almighty Father.

If you had a father whose death traumatized you, you may struggle to see God as a Father who is truly alive.

If you had a father who lived apart from you, you may feel that God can only be rarely encountered.

If you had a father who was emotionally absent, you may tend to think of God as disengaged and detached.

See how the equation is set up?

Hurt by an earthly father, we become suspicious of our heavenly Father.

Our father wounds therefore gravely debilitate us.

They cause us to project our memories of being poorly fathered onto God.

We then wander perpetually in a land of spiritual deprivation - a land in which the living metaphor of God's fatherly love is robbed of all traction in our hearts.

Instead of drawing near, we shrink back.

Instead of trusting, we are suspicious.

Instead of living from a centre of love, we live from a centre of fear.

In all these and other ways, we keep ourselves in chains of religious servitude when we could be relishing the majestic freedom of the children of God.

When the metaphor dies, we die too.

### **Reversing the Projection**

There is really only one way we can find freedom from this terrifying descent into fatherless Christianity. That is to reverse the projection. In other words, instead of caving into our wounded human instincts and projecting our experience of fatherhood onto God, we need to adjust our default settings and do the exact opposite: we need to project God's experience of fatherhood onto ours. Only if we reverse the impulse to transfer from the human to the divine will we become free from the idea and the experience of God's remoteness. Only if we cease from our seemingly relentless tendency to create God in our father's image will we be truly free. Sooner or later we have to face our pain and change our perspective.

We therefore have to make a choice.

The first choice is the choice made by the person who is stuck in the mindset of a spiritual orphan. It is the decision to yield to the gravitational pull of the flesh and to bring God's flawless Fatherhood down to the level of our own experience of being imperfectly fathered.

The second choice is the one made by the person who has bowed to the call to be a son or daughter. It is the decision to surrender to the aerodynamic lift of the Spirit and allow even our worst experiences of fatherhood to be raised up to heaven, where fatherhood is perfectly defined and displayed.

This encouragement to reverse the projection is implied by the Apostle Paul when he breaks out once again into prayer in his Letter to the Ephesians. J.B. Phillips translates verses 14-19 of Ephesians 3 as follows:

*When I think of the greatness of this great plan I fall on my knees before God the Father (from whom all fatherhood, earthly or heavenly, derives its name), and I pray that out of the glorious richness of his resources he will enable you to know the strength of the spirit's inner reinforcement – that Christ may actually live in your hearts by your faith. And I pray that you, firmly fixed in love yourselves, may be able to grasp (with all Christians) how wide and deep and long and high is the love of Christ – and to know for yourselves that love so far beyond our comprehension...*

Notice how Phillips renders the opening statement: 'I fall on my knees before God the Father (from whom all fatherhood, earthly or heavenly, derives its name).'

This differs from other translations:

*For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.*

Why does Phillips say 'fatherhood' when the New International Version here says 'family?'

The answer is simple. The Greek word in the original can mean either. Phillips decided, because of the context, to translate it as 'fatherhood'. Paul is bowing his knees in

prayer to his heavenly Father. Therefore 'fatherhood' is preferable to 'family.'

What did Paul therefore mean when he wrote that all fatherhood derives its 'name' from God the Father?

In the Hebraic mindset, the name of a person is inextricably linked to their character. When Paul says that all fatherhood derives its name from God's Fatherhood, he is proposing that all fatherhood derives its character from God's. This means that if we want to know what fatherhood is truly about, we need to look at the way God fathers us. If we want to know what the name 'father' properly denotes, then we need to build a picture from Scripture of the Fatherhood of God.

In short, we need to reverse the projection.

### **Reconstructing our God-Image**

How then do we go about this?

It needs to be said from the beginning that this is no simple process. Our predilection for quick-fix solutions won't help us here. We cannot trivialize the healing journey by reducing it into a formula, a series of 'how to' steps, or a set of slick sound bites.

The truth is that our father wounds can take time to heal. There may be critical moments of intervention and liberation, but for the most part this is a long process in which the negative experience of being fathered by men needs to be gently displaced by the positive experience of being fathered by God. When the Holy Spirit - who is the Spirit of adoption - is permitted to attend to the intense hurts of our orphaned hearts, we set in motion the possibility of a profound transformation in the way we think. Once our hearts are tenderly held by the enfolding arms of the Spirit, we can

then start to re-imagine God in the light of the Scriptural celebration of his fatherly love. Put another way, once the heart submits to the healing work of the Spirit, the mind can then start to reorient itself to the reinvigorating image of the open-armed Father who loves us like no earthly father ever could.

I have written extensively on the healing work to which the heart needs to be exposed in books like *I Am your Father* so I suggest you venture there<sup>7</sup>. *My Father's Tears* however is more of a theological exploration - one whose purpose is to propose a fresh perspective on the Cross of Christ. For this to happen we have to accept that our image of God might need reconstructing. In particular, we may need to accept the possibility that God is not distant or detached like some of our earthly fathers. He is not the God of the ancient Greeks who is defined by *apatheia* - absence of suffering. He is in fact the exact reverse of this Hellenistic aberration. He is sympathetic not apathetic. He doesn't avoid our pain, he feels it.

In short, God is Immanuel.

He is not a deity who is above or against us.

He is the Father who is among us.

### **A Perfect Likeness**

Where can we find the most dependable picture of the Father heart of God?

Before I answer that it might be helpful to say something again about my own story.

I have already made reference to my adopting father, Philip Stibbe. My twin sister and I were adopted by Philip and Joy Stibbe in 1961. They already had their own son, called

Giles. But they couldn't have any other children. Wanting to adopt twins, they embarked on a journey which was given impetus and direction by a godly nun called Sister Therese. To cut a long story short, she connected them with Claire and me. Some months later, they came into the orphanage and took us into their arms and into their hearts. A few minutes later we were being driven in the back of a car in two Moses' baskets to the house where our soon-to-be brother was eagerly waiting.

Over the next five or six years, Claire and I came to realize that we were different from Giles. Giles was the biological child. We were adopted. Giles was fully aware of this as well. On one occasion he was heard in conversation with his best friend who lived next door.

'My mum's having another baby,' she cried.

'Is it real or is it adopted?' Giles asked.

Clearly the word 'adopted' was too much at that stage! But the idea was not beyond him. He knew that he was different. He was 'real' to use his own terminology. Claire and I were 'adopted.' Or, as someone once put it, he came out of mum's tummy; we came out of mum's heart.

The point I'm making is that Giles was the son by nature while Claire and I were children by adoption. This became more and more evident as we grew up. Giles looked like our father. He sounded like him too. Indeed, today if I want to remember how my father talked and behaved, I need to go no further than his natural son. Giles is truly like his biological father. He possesses an extraordinary similarity to him.

This kind of differentiation needs to be made with regard to the distinction between us and our Brother Jesus. He is the Son by nature. We who are in Christ are sons and daughters by adoption. If we want to know what the Father is like, it is

not primarily at each other that we gaze. It is at Jesus. He is the exact representation and likeness of the Father. He is the Son who truly, reliably and completely reveals what God the Father is like. Without Jesus we would be groping around in the dark. With him we see the Father because the person who sees Jesus sees the Father (John 14.8).

We cannot therefore have a meaningful theology without a robust Christology. Our ability to grasp who God is and speak about him with clarity depends entirely on our ability to grasp who Jesus is and speak about him with integrity. If I want to know what the Father is like then I need to look at and indeed listen to the Son. The Son is the Revealer from heaven. He is the one who reminds us what the Father who transcends time is really like. In the same way, my brother Giles is the one who continues to remind me what my adoptive father - who is now beyond space and time - was really like.

The Son affords a clear view of the Father's love.

He is a dependable picture of the Father heart of God.

### **Feasts for the Fallen**

In everything that Jesus said and did he revealed what his heavenly Father is like. He did nothing unless he first saw his Father doing it. He said nothing unless he heard the Father first saying it. In both his works and words, Jesus provided a pristine window onto the fatherly heart of God.

Let's begin by looking at his words.

There is no finer and more compelling picture of the Father than in Jesus' most famous parable, often called 'The Parable of the Prodigal Son.' Actually, as has been pointed out many times, the story is not really about the rebellious younger son. It is about the outrageously loving father.

The story itself has a context in its original setting. Jesus tells this story during a debate with some religious legalists who are murmuring about the company he's been keeping. In particular, they are muttering and gossiping about the rabble with which he shares his meals. Tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes - the litter layer of Jewish society - are flocking to his open table.

'If he was the Messiah, he wouldn't be having meals with messed up people like this!'

That was the gist of their murmuring.

Jesus doesn't answer their critique with a well fashioned, doctrinal argument.

He tells a story.

In fact, he tells three - a trilogy of parables in which there's a lot of partying when the lost are found.

The third of these concerns a lost boy - a son who demands his inheritance while his father is still alive and wanders off to squander it all on what we would today call 'an addictive lifestyle.'

The father does not run after him but waits at home, praying and pining for the day when his much loved and much missed boy will come shuffling home.

Then one day he sees the silhouette of a man on the horizon of the desert.

Luke records what happens next:

*But while 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.*

See what Jesus does here. First of all, he cleverly criticizes his critics through his depiction of the father. This dad believes in embrace not exclusion. His son is covered in the detritus of the pig pen. He is truly unclean and deserves to be excluded. But the father doesn't tell him to wash and to change his clothes before accepting him back. He runs to him and hugs the hell out of him. Indeed in the original language, Luke tells us that he falls upon his son's neck.

Secondly, Jesus subtly portrays a father who goes far beyond what any dad in that culture would have been expected to do. In the shock of that there is a stunning hint about the purpose of the story. The purpose is not to dwell on the son and reinforce the guilt-edged religion of his audience. It is to focus on the father and subvert the very God-image and God-concept that his listeners have been promoting. Their God is a God of exclusion. His is the God of embrace.

What the Son is doing here then is revealing his Father.

The accepting, non-judgmental, patient, affectionate, merciful and party-throwing father in the parable is a picture of our Father in heaven.

It is the furthest remove from the legal misrepresentation of God in the minds and on the lips of Jesus' religiously sophisticated listeners.

This is a familial not a legal God.

This is the God who holds banquets for broken people, just like Jesus is doing.

This is the Father that the world has been waiting for. Without Jesus we would never have seen him.

### **The Mourning Messiah**

Is it possible to imagine the father in the parable holding back his tears when he sees his son and runs like the wind to intercept him?

It is not.

His intestines were torn the moment he realized that the distant figure was his lost son.

That is the essence of Luke's phrase, 'he had compassion on him.' This is a gut-level response - deeper even than the emotions. It is something primal, visceral, and parental. There are really no adequate words to translate it.

Consequently we have to fill in the blanks as we imagine the eyes of the running father here. The narrative restraint of Jesus, the Master Storyteller, cries out for this.

This father must then have been weeping.

And this means that our heavenly Father weeps too.

If we are in any doubt we should remember the shortest verse of the Bible. John 11.35 may be small in vocabulary but it is big in theology.

As Jesus stands outside the tomb of his much loved friend called Lazarus John records, 'Jesus wept.'

John's word for 'wept' suggests a much deeper emotional response than the one used of the mourners who are wailing in the vicinity of the Bethany tomb. This verb means not just to weep but to sob. In saying this John doesn't resort to 'telling'. In other words, he doesn't tell us what is going on in Jesus' heart. Like the best storytellers he restricts himself to 'showing.' He simply shows us Jesus sobbing, but in that very act of showing there is a wealth of suggestion. For in John's gospel, to see Jesus is to see the Father. Everything Jesus says and does is revelatory. It discloses the

Father heart of God. And if Jesus sobs at a funeral two thousand years ago, that means the Father weeps at our funerals too.

It was for this reason that in the two decades I spent serving as a parish priest I would always speak on John 11.35 and the 'weeping Father' at funeral services. So many mourners at chapels and churches, gravesides and gardens, had been influenced by Greek thinking. Their template was one in which God was remote from their pain, far away from their loss, incapable of feeling what they felt. But in hearing of the mourning Messiah at Lazarus' tomb, their template began to change. They heard about a God who weeps - a Father whose tears fall into the midst of their sorrow.

In that revelation there truly is some solace. Though it can never offer an answer to 'why', it can offer an answer to 'what.'

No one can claim to know *why* God allows some of the suffering that we see.

But we can all know *what* he is doing when we suffer loss.

According to John 11.35, the Father is sobbing too.

He knows what it is to be inconsolable with grief.

Thanks to the man of sorrows, he truly is familiar with our deepest pits of pain.

### **First Things First**

What all this indicates is the paramount importance of starting with our image of God before we proceed to the event of the Cross. If we begin to look at the Calvary event with a faulty picture of the character of God we may very likely end up with a distorted view of the atonement. For example, those who believe that God is before anything else a judge will see

the Cross achieving a legal purpose - a purpose in which Jesus suffers some sort of punitive justice in our place. Those who believe that God is first and foremost a King will see the Cross achieving a military purpose - a purpose in which Christ triumphs over the devil through his death. How we see God dictates how we see everything, especially the Cross.

Our fundamental God-image and God-concept is accordingly of paramount importance. The way we picture God will radically affect the way we picture the atonement.

This is why God's Fatherhood must come first.

For me, the primary living metaphor which defines the very core of God's nature is the apostolic depiction of him as a loving, adopting and affectionate Father. That is his divine identity. He is our Father in heaven.

Immediately we say this, however, we must be careful not to dilute or pollute his Fatherhood by importing ideas taken from our own experiences of being fathered.

He is not a Father who vents his rage at us like human fathers who traumatize their sons and daughters through uncontrolled anger and shameful abuse.

He is not a Father who frowns with disapproval at us like fathers on earth who degrade their children by making them feel as if they are forever a disappointment.

He is not a Father who hides behind the clouds like human fathers who sit behind a tabloid or a tablet, disengaged from the cries of joy and pain from their children's hearts.

He is not a Father who can only be rarely known, like earthly fathers who - whether by choice or reluctantly - only make contact with their children occasionally.

He is none of these.

He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

You cannot separate the Father and the Son.

The Father is the Father of Jesus.

Jesus is the Son of the Father.

Everything we know about the Father we know because of  
Jesus.

He is just like Jesus.

He has fellowship with the fallen.

He has banquets with the broken.

He touches the untouchables.

He loves the unlovable.

He makes wine at weddings.

And he grieves at gravesides.

As the psalmist proclaimed,

*You have stored my tears*

*in your bottle*

*and counted each of them (Psalm 56:8*

CEV).

This then is the perfect Father - the Father whose Son  
came into our orphaned planet so that he could bring us home  
as his royally adopted sons and daughters.

He is truly a Father to the fatherless and a champion for  
the orphan.

He is relational not remote.

He believes in embrace not exclusion.

Once you see God like this, you will gaze at the Cross  
with marveling eyes.

Like the prodigal, you will see him running towards you,  
his face wet with tears.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Passion of the Father**

### Chapter 3: THE PASSION OF THE FATHER

Sitting in a large cinema in Leicester Square with hundreds of film critics was a first for me. It was 2003 and Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* was about to be released and I had been invited by the BBC to attend a press screening. The BBC wanted me to speak at a series of interviews a few days later on the Sunday morning, commenting on aspects of the movie. I was sometimes invited to discuss issues of faith and film so I was looking forward to the challenge.

After a quick read of the press pack and a brief introduction from the film's producer I sat back as the lights went down in the auditorium.

Nothing could have really prepared me for what followed. I had heard that the movie showed graphic depictions of Christ's sufferings. But this was beyond anything that I could have imagined. It was without doubt the most violent film I had ever watched. The torment of the seemingly endless flogging of Christ and then the lingering and minute focus on the process of crucifixion were almost too much to bear. I was not alone in shifting restlessly in my seat.

I'll be honest. At times I thought that Gibson's portrayal bordered on a glorification of pain. Other films of his such as *Apocalypto* don't hold back when it comes to blood-letting. *The Passion of the Christ* was so overwhelmingly brutal that after a while I found myself shutting down, as in other Gibson movies. This felt like a very angry film. Even the portrayal of God seemed to veer in this direction. Where was his love? Where was his forgiveness?

And then something unexpected happened.

At the moment when Jesus breathed his last breath (elongated and amplified on the soundtrack), the camera angle was elevated to a position far above the place of execution. As in Dali's painting, *St John of the Cross*, we were now afforded a vantage point above Golgotha.

At first I thought that the tiny figures way below were encased within a bubble.

Then I realized, along with the hundreds of others in the cinema, that this was not a bubble but a raindrop - the first drop of a deluge.

As the contours of the raindrop became more defined it seemed to detach itself from the tiny hill where the execution had just ended.

Then it began to fall.

Down, down, it went, taking us with it, all the way from the darkening heavens to the dusty earth.

When it touched down in the stony sand at the foot of the Cross, the splash seemed to be out of proportion to the size of the raindrop and the sound felt more like that of a wave breaking than a drop of water landing.

Now it became clear.

It was more than a raindrop.

It was a tear - a divine tear.

Gibson was not showing us an angry God any more.

The Father was weeping over the death of his Son.

I wasn't alone in being affected by this evocative image. It was a singular and oddly discordant moment - a moment of tenderness during several hours of torture.

Up until then, there had been little space given to the notion that God felt anything other than rage. And there wasn't afterwards either. For no sooner had the tear cascaded into the blood-soaked dust than a storm hit Calvary and an earthquake devastated the Temple. It seemed that Mel Gibson couldn't resist reverting to the image of a raging God - the wind terrifying the Romans on the hill and the earthquake reaping revenge on the Jewish leaders in the city.

But for several heartbeats the theology had changed as dramatically as the angle of vision.

The Father's heart had been glimpsed.

Even if it was artistic license, the picture of the falling tear was evocative. Gibson had gone from the explicit to the implicit, from the literal to the metaphorical, from the cruel to the kind.

It is the stand-out moment in a film of horror and brutality.

### **The Great Hymn Book Controversy**

One of the reasons why the image of the teardrop moved me was because I had already begun to look at the Cross from a different perspective. It had occurred to me that theologians had mostly focused on the Son's suffering at Calvary and on the benefits of that suffering for the believer. But what was the Father doing? What did he experience during the passion of his Son? What would happen if we focused on him?

This, in my view, is unexplored territory.

Often in the Western church we have been told that the Father felt only one thing as his Son died - wrath. In a theory known as 'penal substitutionary atonement' (PSA), some theologians have proposed that the Father poured out his wrath

upon his own Son at Golgotha. In this legal theory human beings stand guilty in the eyes of God but the Son stands in our place and takes our punishment. We deserved to die because of our sinful rebellion against God. The penalty for such rebellion is death. But Christ graciously volunteered to take our place and suffers our punishment instead. God's wrath against sin was poured out upon the Son so that we could be freely pardoned. In this way Jesus' sufferings provide a 'satisfaction' for the Father's holy anger.<sup>8</sup>

This version of penal substitution - with the Father raging at his Son - has come in for heavy criticism.<sup>9</sup>

In the same year that I was commissioned to write this book a controversy broke out over a couplet in a much loved contemporary hymn:

*Till on that Cross when Jesus died*

*The wrath of God was satisfied.*

It all started when an American Presbyterian church committee decided to add 'In Christ Alone' in their new hymn book called *Glory to God*. Before they went to press they decided to check with the authors of the hymn whether they could change the above lines to the following:

*Till on that Cross as Jesus died*

*The love of God was magnified.*

The two authors, Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, refused to grant permission to the changes so the hymn in the end was withdrawn from the new collection.

What was all the fuss about? When one of the committee members was asked, she replied that some members were worried because the view 'that the Cross is primarily about God's need

to assuage God's anger' would be damaging to the worshipper's theological education.<sup>10</sup>

Needless to say this response polarized people. On the one hand there were those who said we need hymns about God's wrath because otherwise we will end up sentimentalizing God's love. On the other hand there were equally strong voices arguing that the penal substitution theory is a grim invention of the medieval and Reformation imagination and should be jettisoned.

This has caused outrage. For some people in the church, believing in the doctrine of penal substitution has become the heart and soul of true Christianity.

If you believe that Jesus satisfied the Father's wrath at Calvary you're in.

If you don't, you're out - along with the revised hymn books.

### **God's Anger, God's Love**

I'm not likely to be able to make peace between these two polarized factions in a few paragraphs but let me begin by saying this. The New Testament does indeed mention the wrath of God a number of times and there is no getting away from this. Having said that, we need to understand the term correctly if we are to make any head way.

What then is the wrath of God?

I define the wrath of God as *the Father's measured and justified anger over human sin, social injustice and demonic wickedness.*

This at first sight seems paradoxical. God is love and yet there are things that he hates.

The Father hates it when people break his commandments, willfully rejecting his offer of relationship, turning away from his gracious overtures of fatherly love.

The Father hates it when young women and children are sold into slavery and then used and exploited as objects of sexual gratification.

The Father hates it when the enemy unleashes hell on families and even whole cultures, creating fatherless societies and orphaned hearts.

In the beauty of holiness, God hates such ugliness.

And surely this makes sense when we think about it. Do we truly believe that God doesn't long with an ardent intensity for the righting of great wrongs? Surely we have to believe that one day God will provide a higher justice for those who have been denied justice on earth? If not, then God may be full of love, but he is not just or good.<sup>11</sup>

The good news for the oppressed is that God's holy anger is being stored up against those who victimize the powerless and abuse the innocent. Seen in this light God's wrath is an expression of his love - his love for those who are the victims of human abuse and demonic destruction.

Far from being a contradiction therefore, God's love towards human kind and his hatred of wickedness are deeply interconnected and entirely compatible.

God hates oppression because he loves the oppressed.

He always has. If he had not, he would be loving but not good.

**The Sin not the Son**

We cannot strip away the 'wrath of God' from the pages of the New Testament nor can we remove anger completely from our picture of the divine love - not without in the process saying that in the end injustices are allowed to stand and vindication will be denied.

Surely no one in their right minds wants to believe that.

Yet at the same time the idea that the Father poured out his anger on his Son at the Cross, who somehow satisfied or slaked this righteous rage in his sacrificial death, needs to be rejected.

First of all, it needs to be rejected because it is in fact a caricature.<sup>12</sup> In reality, there is not just one view of penal substitution, there are several. The version that I have been describing is certainly one, but it is not necessarily the majority view nor is it necessarily the Biblical view. It is an extreme and exaggerated version of the truth.

Secondly, it has to be rejected because it actually distracts people from accepting a more nuanced view of penal substitution. In this more balanced and Biblical view it is not the Son who is the object of the Father's righteous rage at Calvary. It is human sin.

One of the clearest statements of a punitive view of the death of Jesus is in Paul's Letter to the Romans. This statement not in fact in Romans 3:21-25, where many proponents of penal substitution say it is:

*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood - to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the*

*sins committed beforehand unpunished - he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

This is without doubt one of the great passages on the atoning death of Christ. But there is no reference here to the Son absorbing the wrath of the Father in his body on the Cross. Those who use this passage to justify the view that the Father does violence to his Son have to import that idea from elsewhere. It is not in the passage itself, even though there is much about the wrath of God in Romans 1-3.

However, Paul does talk about a penal view of the atonement in Romans 8:1-3:

*What the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*

Here Paul talks about the extreme and disastrous power of sin in the human condition. It is sin that prevents us from fulfilling our calling to live as the righteous sons and daughters of God. In other words, sin debilitates us to such a degree that it is impossible for us to obey the Torah. As such we forever open ourselves to the charge that we are lawbreakers and become painfully aware - through the accusations of the enemy - that we never measure up.

But, says Paul, God sent his Son to save us from this dreadful state. Christ identified completely with our human condition, becoming like us in our humanity while at the same time being quite unlike us in his purity. As such the Son of God showed human beings what it means to be a son or a

daughter of the High King of Heaven. In sinful human flesh, Jesus lived a life of perfect Sonship. Right to the last, he loved God with his entire being and his neighbor as himself.

When Christ went to the Cross, he did for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. *He took the condemnation for sin - the condemnation found in God's Torah - in his dying human body.* As such Christ was our substitute. He did die a sacrificial death. And he also bore the condemnation that was rightfully ours. He bore it so that we don't.

But notice this.

God condemned *sin* in Christ's dying body.

He did not condemn his *Son*.

The rage that was burning in the heart of the Father was therefore not directed at his *Son* but at our *sin*. Between the words 'Son' and 'sin' there is a world of difference.

### **Distorting the Father**

It seems to me there are two dangers at the moment when it comes to discussions about penal substitution. The first is that those who propose it are in grave danger of implying and indeed sometimes stating that this is the central metaphor of the atonement in the New Testament and that those who do not champion it in the way they do are not just in error, they are not even in Christ.

This view is divisive.

The second is that those who reject it out of hand are in grave danger of rejecting just one version of it - an extreme version at that - when in fact there are more balanced and biblical versions which do not lead us to portray the Father as unleashing violent rage upon his Son.

In my view, it is entirely possible to hold a penal view of the atonement without resorting to the idea that the Son appeased the Father's wrath at Calvary. Apart from anything else, holding this extreme view of 'satisfaction' requires a distortion - I would say a mutilation - of our image of the Father. Sooner or later we have to ask, 'what kind of father treats his child in such a way?' And then, 'in what sense is this Good News?'

If those outside the church are presented with a message which requires them to believe that the Father is capable of such violently abusive actions, how will it ever be Good News to them when stories of abusive fathers in our own social context are always bad news?

It could never be.<sup>13</sup>

One of the things I have seen time and again as I have engaged in counseling and prayer ministry is the often heart-breaking sight of people being set free from the effects of abuse by their fathers. The critical moment in their liberation is always when they come to recognize in their hearts that their heavenly Father is not like their earthly father. Abba, Father never shames them with words, with violence, emotional manipulation, suffocation, religious control or any other oppressive tactics. He is the exact opposite. Where abusive fathers shame, Abba Father honors. Where abusive fathers hurt, Abba Father heals.

What kind of Good News is it therefore to the victim of paternal abuse that our Father in heaven poured out his wrath upon his Son at Calvary?

Is this kind of Father safe?

Can this kind of Father be a source of freedom from the terrors of an abusive past?

Is this kind of wrath in any sense a source of solace to the humiliated heart?

I would suggest that the answer has to be no.

The image of the Father pouring out his wrath upon his one and only precious Son has to be vigorously questioned. Christ suffered in our place at the Cross. That is a given. Christ's death is indeed sacrificial. That is also a given. But his death at Calvary did not involve him appeasing or satisfying the Father's wrath. If it did, then Jesus ends up saving us from the Father as much as from sin. To say that would mean dividing the Trinity into a bad-cop good-cop dynamic - the Father being against us, the Son being for us.

### **A Grief Observed**

If the Father was not feeling wrath towards his Son at Calvary, then what was he feeling?

In some people's minds this question shouldn't be asked at all. 'God does not feel as we feel. Even his wrath is more of a state of mind than what we would call a feeling. What you're doing is projecting human emotions onto God. You're guilty of anthropomorphizing God the Father.'<sup>14</sup>

If you believe this then please keep in mind that we are all created in the image of God and if that is so then our human emotions are reflections - however distorted - of divine affections.

We cannot therefore so easily dismiss the existence of divine feelings. God truly does experience what we would term 'emotions'. They may be different from ours in terms of their perfection, but that doesn't mean that they bear no generic likeness to what we experience.

God the Father feels for us, not just as a state of mind, but with his heart.

He relates to us affectively not just cognitively.

Do we really think that when the Scriptures talk about the Father rejoicing over his people with singing that this is purely a state of mind? (Zephaniah 3.17)

Have we not moved beyond our idolatry of reason and our suspicion of emotion?

Surely it is time to embrace the idea that *Abba*, Father has feelings towards his Son and indeed towards us.

What then was the Father's experience as he gazed upon his dying Son?

If it wasn't divine rage, what was it?

The answer cannot be summed up adequately in a few words. Even the wisest philosopher or the most lyrical of poets would find it impossible to do justice in language to the Father's experience at Calvary.

What we can say is that what happened at the Cross embraced the whole of the Trinity. While the three persons of the Godhead are inseparable - three in one and one in three - they did experience the same Calvary event individually. What the Father experienced was accordingly different from what the Son experienced and what the Father felt was the very worst kind of grief - the agonizing sorrow of seeing his own Son die.

There is almost certainly no worse pain than the sight of one's own child in pain, in peril, and at the point of death. The greatest tragedy of all is when a parent has to outlive their own child. It is the most gut-wrenching tragedy, the most inexplicable mystery. In my decades as a parish priest

the most harrowing moments were those in which I had to minister to a dying child and then oversee their burial, in the company of their distraught parents and family. There is no sense in this. No one can explain why this happens. There is no theodicy that I have ever read that begins to offer an explanation that casts any light on why such desolate moments are allowed to happen. It is utterly perplexing and deeply devastating. As King Theoden says in the second *Lord of the Rings* movie, 'no parent should have to bury their child.'

But if they do, there is one crumb of comfort and that is this. Our Father has endured the same pain. He too has watched in unutterable distress as his Son suffered and then died. He too has stood and wept with those who mourn. He too has seen his Son buried.

In that there is at least some solace.

When Jesus made his cry of desolation from the Cross, he used words from the beginning of Psalm 22. Later on in that same Psalm King David says this of God's response to the afflictions of his servant:

*For he has not despised or scorned  
the suffering of the afflicted one;  
he has not hidden his face from him  
but has listened to his cry for help.*

[Psalm 22.24, NLT]

What was true for the Son by nature is true for the sons and daughters by adoption. The Father doesn't turn his heart away from us when we suffer. He turns his face towards us not away, and he is not deaf to our cries but truly attentive.

Abba, Father is not apathetic.

He does not hide his face from our tears.

## **Losing Contact**

There is one more thing to say.

When the sin of the world was absorbed into Jesus' dying body, there was a breach in the Son's experience of his relationship with his Father.

This was inevitable. God is holy. When Christ, who never sinned, took the sin of the world in his human flesh, there was a momentary separation between the Father and the Son. This was not because the Father stopped loving his Son. It was because the world's sin created a barrier between the Father and the Son and between the Son and his Father. Sin does that. It separates and divides families and peoples.

We will look later at what this must have felt like from the Son's side, but from the Father's perspective this must have grieved him in ways we can only begin to imagine.

While the Trinity was not fractured (and can never be fractured), in those moments when the Son became sin for our sakes there had to have been great sorrow.

The Father still adored his Son but our sin made it impossible for the two to dwell together in that same holy intimacy that they had always enjoyed.

Our sin divided Abba from his only Son for the one and only time from eternity to eternity.

How did the sun not fall from the sky?

One of the most excruciating experiences which a father can endure is loss of contact with his children. This can happen for many reasons, but when it does, a father's heart breaks.

And here I have to be honest.

I have just endured a terrible year. As a result of my own weakness, I have lost contact with my four children. Whereas before I was able to be with them most of the time, now I do not see them at all. Where there was once constant communication - whether written or spoken - now there is not.

I cannot begin to put into words the agony I feel because of this.

It is my sin that has created the barrier, not theirs. But I pine for them night and day, longing for just one text, one letter, one email, one phone call - anything.

The only thing that helps me in my distress is the consoling thought that my Father in heaven understands. Even if it is true that in his case he was sinless (whereas in mine I am not), I know that he knows. He has been there. At Calvary he endured separation from his Son. I can lean my head on his grieving heart and find comfort there.

He understands.

### **Back to the Movies**

So I return to where I began this chapter, with *The Passion of the Christ*.

It may be that I was a little hard on Mel Gibson's film. I know of at least one life that was changed as a result of it, that of my twin sister Claire. She had been on a long journey of spiritual seeking when she found her way into a multiplex cinema in the state of New Mexico where she lives. Seeing on the screen what Jesus had endured for her she surrendered. All her resistance to the divine love gave in. She opened her heart to the love of all loves and is now a committed Christian, serving the Lord and growing from strength to strength in her faith in Christ.

So perhaps I was harsh.

I was moved by the film too, at least when the Father's tear fell from heaven onto the soil of Golgotha.

Gibson, for all his faults, had seen something.

He had not only seen the passion of the Son. He had connected with the passion of the Father.

In that passion there is hope for all those who grieve at the loss of intimacy and even relationship with their own children.

In that compassion there is healing.