

Sermon on Sunday 12 June 2022

on Zoom

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Readings: Romans 8. 11-17 & John 16: 12-15

Romans 8. 15:

“You have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

Trinity Sunday! One God in Three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

From the earliest days, the Christian world has tried to make sense of how three elements of its experience of God fitted together. The ancient revelation of the One God, Yahweh, all powerful but unknowable; the charismatic and radical man from Galilee who dared to address that same God as ‘Abba’ – ‘Dad’; and the transforming, energising power that swept into the lives of believers after the first Christian Pentecost.

It took them nearly 400 years to pin it all down in what we now know as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

But men like St Paul, and St John the Evangelist, didn't know that. To them, the Holy Trinity was not a doctrine. It was a daily encounter with a God who came at you from all angles! They didn't want people to believe in a God who was one but yet three, they wanted you to get to know him – or was it 'them'?

In our readings, both John and Paul agree that it is the Spirit that helps us to make sense of the relationship between Christ and his Father, but Paul is not looking to draw a neat boundary around his Triune God. He's much more concerned with where we fit into the relationship.

You may remember from a time in your own life, or perhaps you have already seen in the lives of your own children, when a young man or woman senses that a romantic relationship has reached a critical point and the make or break challenge is issued: 'I think it's time you met my parents.' Will they like my chosen partner? Will my partner like them? Will they act weirdly and embarrass themselves and me? Or will they welcome my partner into the family.

In other places Paul writes of the Church, that is, all those who find faith through Jesus, as the 'Bride of Christ'; being received into the family of God through marriage to his Son. And maybe the same question can come up. How will we get on with the rest of the family, especially that rather unpredictable Holy Spirit?

By the way, I'm afraid you'll have excuse some gender specific language – that was all Paul had to work with!

In Romans 8, St Paul's cautious exploration of what we would now call Trinitarian thought also starts with the idea of joining a family. "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

Here Paul looks at another way of joining a family, by adoption. Our modern translations quite fairly speak of children of God, but the inclusive language does rather take something away from Paul's message, because we automatically think of young children or even infants.

In the original Greek, Paul writes of 'sons' and in Roman culture, the implication is not of infant adoption as is general in our culture.

In the Roman world, if a man had any wealth or property to speak of, and he had no sons of his own, he would choose a young man of appropriate standing and character, perhaps a relative, or the son of a friend, and appoint him as his legal heir – and this was done by adoption. The adopted son would become part of the household, and be trained to carry on the family business.

This kind of adoption was quite common, and quite respectable, even Emperors did it, training their adopted sons to run whole Empires!

But let's keep to a smaller scale and think of the Family Business. When continuity and heritage were valued rather more in commerce than perhaps they are today, you would not go far along a high street or a trading estate before you saw a sign bearing the words 'and Son'. The evidence that a business was carrying on at least into its second generation.

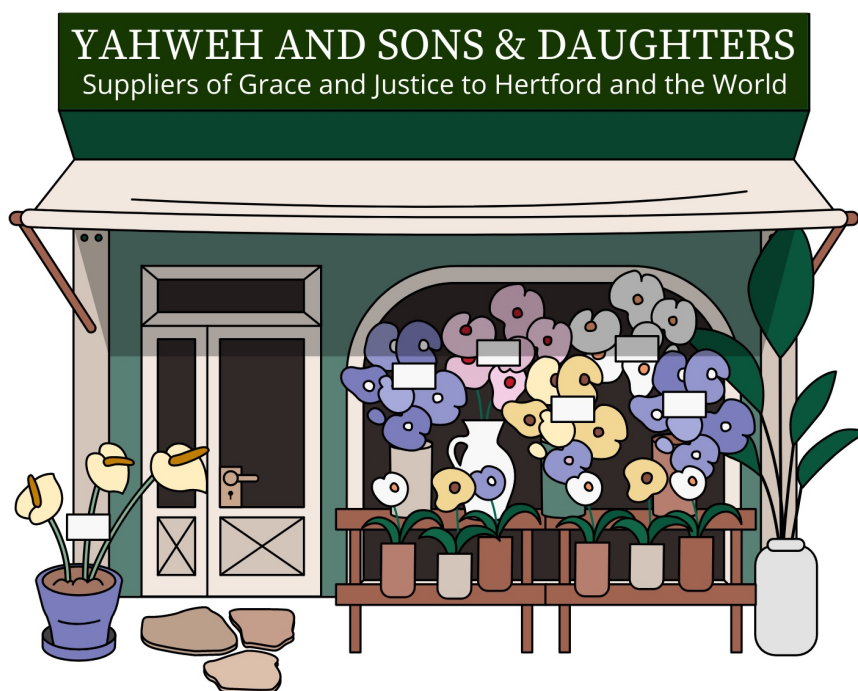
St Andrews' neighbours still go by the name of Beckwith & Sons, you'll find a L Bennett & Sons and A Wilson & Sons in Hertford. You have to look a bit further to find any 'and Daughter' but they do exist. I particularly noticed TW Crowden & Daughter, scrap metal merchants of Newark, encouraging evidence that gender equality can make progress in any part of the economy.

Business partnerships in England are a serious matter. If you are a partner in a business, you have power to act, to buy and sell, in the name of all the other partners, and all share in the outcome of your successes – and failures.

So it is a brave father – or mother - who takes a son or daughter into partnership in their business. It used to be a big moment when the '& Son' went on the sign above the

shop – because that was notice to the outside world that the son was now an equal partner in the business.

This is how St Paul describes God’s work of grace. In modern commercial language, God offers to take us into partnership; giving us equal status in the family firm alongside his first Son, making us joint heirs with Christ. That is an amazing act of trust, and bestows on us a tremendous responsibility. Putting our name above the shopfront: Yahweh and Sons & Daughters – suppliers of Grace and Justice to Hertford and the world.



Are we up for the challenge? Happily, there’s always that other, unpredictable but endlessly energetic, member of the family on hand to help us when we’re struggling – the Holy Spirit. The family firm is in safe hands.