



## Lesson Four: When you meet with God...you can be familiar.

### Reflection/Discussion

I wonder how you feel about the exercises you have been doing over the first three weeks of the course? I call them 'exercises' because that is what they are. Like learning to play the piano, you need to do exercises before you can play a good tune. Quietening our minds can be difficult. Like demanding children, our thoughts grab our attention as if they are the most important thing that's happening. But we need to learn how to put them to one side when we wish to be silent and develop our ability to have a wordless communion with God. It takes time to become good at it, so don't worry if you have been struggling. Imagine that you lost your sight and had to learn to rely on your hearing in order to know what was going on around you. It would take time for your hearing to develop so that it could compensate for your loss of sight. In the same way it takes time to develop our sense of what is going on around us without the conversation in our head dominating that process. It's one of those things that you can only really learn by experience, but as you develop your inner stillness, so God is able to show you what he is doing, and your communication with him opens up. Anyway, I hope that I have given you some ideas that you can practice to develop this ability.

### Teaching

Matthew 6: 9a *"This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven,'"*

Luke 11: 2a *"He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father,'"*

### A new Father...

When Jesus told his disciples to begin their prayers by addressing God as 'Father' or 'Daddy', he was doing something much more radical than just telling them how to address God. It was not unheard of for the people of Israel to see God as the Father of the nation, but the way Jesus uses this word redefines both their understanding of who God is, and their understanding of what a father is. When Philip says to Jesus, *"Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us"* (John 14: 8), Jesus replies (in verse 9), *"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."* In the Temple in Jerusalem at that exact moment in time, there would have been people approaching God with the sort of awe, respect and fear that created a certain distance in their own minds between them and God. In contrast to this, where Jesus was, people were pushing their way into his presence, grabbing at his clothing, and calling out to him from the back of the crowd in order to present him with their requests for healing, etc.

Then we have Jesus' parable of *the prodigal son*, which many see as being more about the father (who represents God) than about the wayward son. The story is a messy one in terms of cultural protocols. The son, taking his inheritance before his father's death was shocking in itself, and it even broke one of the Ten Commandments, "*Honour your father and mother...*" But possibly more shocking to the people at that time were the actions of the father, running down the street with his robe lifted up, to welcome home this shamed and weary young man... Luke 15: 20b "*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 around him and kissed him.*" For many of the people who heard those words from Jesus, this kind of Father/God did not fit into their mindset. I guess it is inevitable that for the people in the Gospels, and for people today, our view of a father is going to be shaped in large part by the father figures we have experienced in our upbringing. The important thing for us to discover is what Jesus meant by the word 'Father'.

### The mothering Father...

When God created human beings, he did so, "*in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*" (Genesis 1: 27) So, all the characteristics that we think of as being male or female are, in fact, a reflection of the characteristics of the one God, whom Jesus encourages us to call 'Father'. The purpose of our spiritual journey is to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus, to become the wonderful people that he has given us the potential to be, and in so doing grow in our friendship with God. Now as we read before, the image of the Father can be seen in Jesus, the Son, so that as we become more like Jesus, we are also growing in likeness to the Father.

So what should we see in someone who has grown throughout their lives into the likeness of God? That is a difficult question because we are all born into a wide spectrum of male/female characteristics. Some men have what we might consider to be predominantly male characteristics, whilst other men are born with a more sensitive or feminine personality. The same can be said for the range of characteristics found in different women. Perhaps, when people are younger and forming relationships with the opposite sex it is helpful when the masculine and feminine characteristics are more clearly defined. But as we continue our journey towards the likeness of God, so the masculine and feminine characteristics that are in each of us should develop and reveal themselves. In some way or other we become more 'androgynous' in the best sense of that term, which is derived from the two Greek words meaning 'man' and 'woman'.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the 'Father' that Jesus is referring to is not an exclusively all-male patriarchal figure that women might reasonably find hard to identify with, but a God who has all the characteristics of man and woman in their fullness.

### The Father who chooses you...

So why call God 'Father' rather than 'Mother' if both terms would eventually hold all the characteristics of both male and female? I cannot fully answer that question. There is definitely an element of mystery about it. So many single mothers today do an excellent job of bringing up their children on their own. Yet fathers do seem to offer something different and needed by children of

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<sup>1</sup> "From Wild Man to Wise Man – Reflections on Male Spirituality" by Richard Rohr, 2005, page 17-18.

both sexes as they grow up. This is how Richard Rohr explains how the Jewish people came to see God as a father; *“Our father, and his response to us, is the first response of an ‘outsider.’ Mom’s love is body-based from the womb and the breast. It is assumed, taken for granted, relied upon instinctively, which is why a foundational ‘mother wound’ can be even more devastating to one’s very core. When one’s good mother dies, it first feels like God has died, because she is your first clear God image and Divine security.*

*But Dad is that other one in the house, at a greater distance. He does not ‘have’ to love you. His love is not inherently and instinctively felt and drawn upon, like Mother love. He must choose to love you! He decides for you, he picks you out, he notices you among the many. It redeems, liberates and delights, therefore, in a totally different way. As we know, God was first seen as feminine by almost all primal cultures, but Jewish religion came to see God as ‘Abba,’ Father, Daddy, because their experience was of being chosen by God, being the objects of Divine Election, being personally preferred to the other nations. ‘When Yahweh set his heart on you and chose you, it was not because you were greater than other peoples, you were the least of all peoples. It was simply for love of you that Yahweh chose you’ (Deuteronomy 7: 7). That is the uniquely transformative experience of male love. It validates us and affirms us deeply, precisely because it is not necessary.”<sup>2</sup>*

The distinction Rohr draws between a mother’s love and that of a father is, I admit, a subtle one. Fathers have told me of the overwhelming feelings of love they have had for their new born baby, which suggests that they had little choice about it. Yet God loves because it is a fundamental part of his nature to love (*“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love”* 1 John 4: 8), whilst at the same time God also *chooses*, as we saw in Deuteronomy 7: 7. Working in a hostel for homeless men, I have met many who have chosen not to be a father to children they have had with women in their past. They may have some positive feelings towards these children who are their own flesh and blood, but for various reasons this has never led to them contributing to the upbringing or welfare of the child, and love reveals itself through our actions!

[We can be familiar...](#)

Finally, the thing about names is that they create impressions in our minds about the person they are associated with. Theoretically we could give God any name we liked, but many names would create a false impression of who God is. That, in turn, will affect the relationship we have with him. So Jesus said that we should call him ‘Father’, or ‘Daddy’ or ‘Papa’, because if we truly understood the wonderful and loving relationship God intended us to have with our earthly fathers, then we would understand that this was a good description of the friendship we can have with him. God has chosen you and me, to love us as his sons and daughters. We are *family* now, which means we can be *familiar* with him when we approach him in prayer.

## Exercise

In the first three exercises of the course we concentrated on trying to quieten our minds and be more aware of ourselves and our surroundings. I fully accept that this is a skill some people will

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<sup>2</sup> “From Wild Man to Wise Man – Reflections on Male Spirituality” by Richard Rohr, 2005, page 68-69.

find easier than others, so don't worry about it if you found it difficult, that's quite normal! However, I would encourage you to practise some sort of quietening down exercise, either one I have suggested or one of your own, at the beginning of your prayer time. As Joyce Huggett writes, *"Until our bodies, minds and spirits let go of the clutter we bring to our places of prayer, we automatically tune out the still, small voice of God. Unless we come into stillness before God we do not detect either the fullness of his presence or the winsomeness of his voice."*<sup>3</sup>

This week we have been looking at the issue of God as Father. I am very much aware that for many people this is not a good image to attach to God. So if you have no problem with talking to God as 'Father' then please continue to address him in this way. However, if this is a problem for you, for the purpose of this exercise I would like to suggest you imagine God as a caring counsellor. The thing about a counsellor is that he is not there to fix your problems in a direct or practical way. He is there to listen to whatever you want to tell him and make whatever comments he thinks may be helpful. In so doing, you come to a place where either you are able to solve the problem yourself, or you simply grow through it. So the aim of this exercise is just to talk to God for the remainder of your ten minutes each day (after the time spent quietening down) about whatever is going on in your life. God actually does want to hear whatever you tell him, because he loves you and cares about even the smallest things that are happening to you. He doesn't find you boring. He doesn't mind you repeating yourself. He's just happy that you want to spend some time sharing the life he has given you with him. So don't ask God to fix anything for you during these ten minutes. Making requests is not the purpose of this exercise (however, feel free to do that some other time if you wish to). This is simply an exercise in talking to the God who cares about you, slowly and thoughtfully, about whatever's going on in your life right now.

So what do I mean by 'slowly and thoughtfully'? I am assuming that you are going to be doing your prayers in silence. So begin the exercise by quietening your mind so that, if possible, you achieve silence in your head. Then say a sentence of whatever you want to tell God. As you do this you may find that other thoughts take the opportunity to come back into your head at the same time. So when you've finished your sentence, take a moment to quieten your thoughts again before telling God something else. The aim is to get to the point where you can speak to God with one voice whilst maintaining a background of silence. If you were trying to have a conversation with another person, and someone else was talking to you at the same time, the conversation would get a bit confusing. So if, when you are trying to pray in silence, you have other thoughts, songs, etc, going on in your head, your prayers can become a bit disjointed and it will be harder to receive what God may be trying to say to you.

#### Exercise in brief:

- 1) Pray – give God this time you have set aside for him.
- 2) Sit still and spend a moment becoming attentive to God.
- 3) Talk to your heavenly Father (or caring counsellor) about what is going on in your life.
- 4) Talk to him one sentence at a time.
- 5) Hold back from making any requests.
- 6) Close the exercise with a prayer of thanks.

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<sup>3</sup> "Listening to God" by Joyce Huggett, 2005, page 37.

## **Encouragement**

*Rosalind writes...*

A job opportunity came up with a Christian organization which I was excited about and applied for. I was the only applicant and the organization seemed keen to proceed. However, weeks and months went by with still no date for the interview. I began to wonder whether this was an indication from God that I was not meant for this job. After 5 months I felt that I could not put my life on hold any longer. After praying about the situation one morning, I felt that it would be right to withdraw my application if I did not have an interview date within the next week. That very day an email came offering me an interview 6 days later! The interview went well and I got the job.

On starting work with this organization some people at my church asked if they could receive my prayer letter. Although the church supported and prayed for overseas missionaries in a number of ways, little attention was given to local ministries such as mine unless they were actually church projects. I prayed about this and the idea came to me of producing a monthly Home Mission bulletin, similar to the Overseas Mission bulletin the church already produced. However, before I got round to doing this, I received an email from the church office saying that they had had the same idea, and asking for my contribution. What an answer to prayer!

## **Sayings of the Desert Fathers/Mothers**

*Amma Syncletica, "There are many who live in the mountains and behave as if they were in a town, and they are wasting their time. It is possible to be a solitary in one's mind while living in a crowd, and it is possible for one who is a solitary to live in the crowd of his own thoughts."*