

## Our Father in heaven and fathers on earth

12<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year – Cycle A – June 21, 2020 –  
Readings: Jer 20:10-13; Rom 5:12-15; Mt 10:26-33

Father's Day

“Not one sparrow falls to the ground without your Father knowing!” (Mt 10:29)

Prologue: Four points are significant in choosing to focus on ‘father’ imagery in the homily today: (a) The presence of close to a thousand references to ‘father’ in the Bible—used both for God and for earthly fathers; (b) Three references to our ‘Father’ in heaven in the gospel passage; (c) The mention of the father of the human race, Adam, in today’s second reading; and, finally, (d) Though it is a secular commemoration, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of June is usually celebrated as ‘Father’s Day’.

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading is part of the fifth and the last of Jeremiah’s candid ‘*Confessions*’ to God (11:18-20; 15:15-21; 17:14-18 and 20:7-18). Called at the early age of twenty-three to the prophetic office, despite his protestations, “I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy” (1:6), God assures him of divine protection and providence: “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you” (1:8). God’s promises seem hollow, for Jeremiah runs into trials and troubles. His mission is truly daunting since he has to prophesize in a critical period of Judah’s history when kings, priests and people were more interested in politics than in their covenantal relationship with Yahweh, God. While the kings got into shady alliances with Egypt and Babylon, the priests were guilty of abuses in the temple. Thus, Jeremiah foretold the destruction of the city and the temple leading to the Babylonian exile. For his fearlessness, he was: (a) imprisoned; (b) beaten; (c) lowered into a cistern; (d) put into stocks; and finally, (e) killed. Despite his “Terror on every side!” (6:25; 20:10; 46:5; 49:29) experiences, he remains faithful to God whom he sees as a kind of Father figure who instils confidence, dispels fear. Jeremiah can be seen as the prototype of the just one facing untold trials—the suffering servant—who nonetheless stays faithful to God.
2. Today’s gospel passage comes towards the end of Jesus’ ‘*missionary discourse*’ where Jesus exhorts the Twelve to be fearless and faithful in the face of imminent perils and persecutions. He refers to “your Father” and “my Father,” obviously referring to his *Abba*, God, who is Father of all peoples. Two attitudes that fortify feelings of ‘filiation’ are fearlessness and faith. Fearlessness is indispensable for disciples who accept God’s Fatherhood, for, they will be persecuted by self-appointed ‘fatherly figures’ like the Pharisees who refuse to accept the ‘good news’ of God’s universal Fatherhood. Thus, Jesus tells his disciples, “Fear not! What I tell you in the dark, tell in the daylight!” He is preparing his followers to tread the path of persecution, which was inevitable for all those prophets of former times—like Jeremiah, for instance—who were hounded and harassed. It is but natural to fear those who are bent on destroying prophets and silencing their protesting voices. However, true prophets know that, ultimately, they are only accountable to God and hence never lose sight of divine protection and deliverance.
3. Besides cultivating an attitude of fearlessness on account of the Fatherhood of God, one must also deepen one’s faith in *Abba*, Father. Jesus’ earthy examples of sparrows and hairs on heads strike his listeners immediately: Sparrows are cheap; yet, “not one falls to the

ground without your Father knowing!” Surely, God’s children are “worth more than hundreds of sparrows!” God’s Providence is not just fatherly protection but motherly affection. Which father bothers about anyone’s falling hairs except his own? It is normally mothers who comb and plait the hair of their children. Indeed, in explaining Abba’s love by giving evocative examples of daily life, Jesus shows how incomparable God’s love, care and concern is when juxtaposed with the human love of fathers who fall short of these qualities eminently perfect of God, our Father.

### **Linking the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading to the theme of fathers and fatherhood**

As mentioned in the ‘Prologue’ another ‘father’ who appears in the second reading is Adam: forefather of us all! Paul writes, “Through one man’s fall so many died!” Paul is not speaking of a physical death, but of a spiritual death that is the outcome of sin and results in separation from God. Like the metaphor of the vine and branches, anyone severed from God is truly dead and decays. Indeed, Adam’s ‘original sin’ tainting our humanity is ‘The Ego’ that engenders godlessness at the personal level—pride, greed and selfishness, as well as frightening forms of domination at the structural, global level: male chauvinism, patriarchy, imperialism and casteism.

### **Three Fatherly Concerns:**

*The Abba-Father Concern:* As Christians, we normally do have good images of Jesus and a deep awareness of his presence. But, what about *Abba*, the First Person of the Trinity? In the whole liturgical calendar, there is no feast devoted to God, *Abba*, the Father. There is thus a tendency to forget about God, who is ever loving, caring and forgiving.

*The Priest-Father Concern:* Catholic ministers are addressed as ‘Fr.’ much to the annoyance of many Christians of other churches who quote Mt 23:9—“Call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father, the one in heaven”—to reject such honorific titles. Many scandals too have shown that we, priests, have not lived up to our avowed lifestyle of being truly ‘fathers’ to the orphans and to children in need.

*The Fathers-on-Earth Concern:* Though seemingly ‘secular’ in character, the celebration of Father’s Day today gives us occasion to pray: “Thank you, Father, for my dearest daddy!” Sigmund Freud traces our neuroses down to turbulent infancy interactions with some strict ‘father figure’: a ‘Super Ego’ that dominates, manipulates, controls. A few might have had overly overbearing fathers, or never experienced the love of fathers due to death or desertion. However, most of us have had fathers who were and are kind, loving and caring. Let us thank God for our earthly fathers and pray that we, too, become ‘father figures’ to protect the weak and provide for the needy.

### **In Lighter Vein:**

Eager to help a young woman who sat still with her eyes closed in his parish-church, a young priest who knew that she had many family problems tapped her on the shoulder and said, “Can I help you in any way?” She nodded and replied, “No, thank you, Fr.! I’ve been getting all the help I need from Our heavenly Father above!” Our *Abba* ‘above’ certainly knows, cares and helps infinitely more than you and I can ever imagine or are capable of loving, caring, helping.

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