

TO THE
House of the Father



*All that is good comes down from the Father of all light
(James 1: 17)*

*Bishop Donal Murray
Limerick
Advent 1997*

No one has seen God

The final year of preparation for the Jubilee is to be the Year of God the Father.

The Bible presents us with a God who is infinitely beyond human understanding. God was not to be represented by any image. He does not resemble anything in the universe. "I am God and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me" (Is 46:9).

Yahweh can only be approached with wonder, reverence and veneration. Moses was told to warn people that they should remain well clear of Mount Sinai when the Lord came down upon it: "Take care not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Anyone who touches the mountain will be put to death" (Ex 19:12). No human being can look at God and survive. Even Moses himself is warned: "You cannot see my face for no one shall see me and live" (Ex 33:20).

We have nothing to offer that is not already his. "With heaven my throne and earth by footstool, what house could you build me, what place for me to rest, when all these things were made by me and all belong to me? – declares Yahweh. But my eyes are drawn to the person of humbled and contrite spirit, who trembles at my word" (Is 66: 1, 2).

The dignity and hope of the chosen people are based precisely on the fact that their God is infinitely beyond anything they could grasp or imagine: "As the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him" (Ps 103:11).

We adore a God whom we cannot see and whose glory is beyond anything we know or understand.

The climate in which we live leaves little space for the reverence and the adoring silence which one needs to approach that inaccessible mystery of God. We deafen ourselves with noise and distraction rather than feel the emptiness in which the question of the meaning of life is heard¹. We surround ourselves with striking and intense images rather than reflect on the immensity of the invisible God.

A sense of God's infinite mystery is central to any effort of renewal. It is fundamental to deepening our awareness of human dignity and to invigorating our commitment to the mission of the Church in preparation for the Great Jubilee:

"There is no more urgent preparation for the performance of these tasks than this: to lead people to discover both their capacity to know the truth and their yearning for the ultimate and definitive meaning of life"².

But God who dwells in inaccessible light has made himself known in an entirely unanticipated way. "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1:18).

The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ

Jesus, born a member of our human family, knows the God of infinite splendour and power as his own Father. The Creator has revealed himself as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God's Fatherhood is altogether unique. A human father becomes a father at some stage during his life. Fatherhood is an aspect, however important, of the whole person who also has other experiences and commitments and relationships. Human fatherhood cannot exist without motherhood. Being a human parent is a shared reality.

In God, none of these considerations apply. God does not *become* Father, but is Father from all eternity. Fatherhood is not an aspect of his person; it is his Personhood. With all his infinite Being, God the Father begets the Son. Fathering is not something he does; it is *who he is*.

¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Orientalis Lumen*, Apostolic Letter on the Eastern Churches, 16.

² JOHN PAUL II, *Fides et Ratio*, On the Relationship between Faith and Reason, 102.

God the Father is the sole origin of the Son. God's Fatherhood, the begetting of the Son, is neither feminine nor masculine³. It transcends any human parenting. It is as much the source and model of motherhood as it is of fatherhood. The seventh century Council of Toledo speaks of the Son being "generated or born *from the Father's womb*"⁴.

So "each of the two sexes is an image of the power and tenderness of God, with equal dignity though in a different way"⁵. "God's parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood, which emphasises God's immanence, the intimacy between the Creator and the universe"⁶.

The intimacy of the relationship between Jesus and his Father is utterly new. He addresses God by a name, *Abba*, which is used only by sons and daughters within the family. It means something like 'Dad'. Nobody would have dreamt of using so familiar a word in speaking to the Creator of the universe.

But Jesus said to his followers, "When you pray, this is what to say: Father..." (Lk 11:2). We too are to call God 'Abba' (Rom 8:15). "To all who received him who believed in his name, [Jesus] gave power to become children of God" (Jn 1:12).

God is the Father of a human being, our Brother. He is the Father of a Man who died the most barbaric and unjust death. In offering his whole life, his whole self, to his Father on the Cross, Jesus, the perfect image of his Father, shows what God is like.

First of all he shows us that God's love is extravagantly merciful, beyond all expectation, given to those who in no way deserve it: "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

Secondly, he shows that the love of God is more powerful than anything we fear. The Father accepts the self-offering of Jesus and receives his human body into the glory which belongs to the Son before the world was made (Jn 17:5). In his resurrection, the Son receives the love of the Father which is more powerful than death and more powerful than evil⁷. We too are promised a new creation where death and mourning and crying and pain will be no more (Rev 21:4). There will be no more night and the Lord God will be our light (Rev 22:5).

Making the Father Known

Jesus tells us about his Father – and ours. 'The Son, who is close to the Father's heart makes him known'.

His own Father was, no doubt, very much in his mind when he told the story of the two sons whose Father loved them deeply (Lk 15:11-32). It is worth reflecting on the three characters in that parable which we call 'the prodigal son'⁸.

When the first son, an impatient young man, demanded everything that was due to him and set off to make his fortune, the father did not stand in his way. He made no attempt to force him to stay.

When things went disastrously wrong, the young man decided to swallow his pride and go home to his father's house. It was remembering his father that prompted him to realise that it would be possible to return. It was the father's love that drew him home, more gently but more powerfully than if he had sent an army to compel him.

³ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, On the Dignity and Vocation of Women, 8, cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 239.

⁴ DENZINGER – SCHÖNMETZGER [DS] (1966), 526,

⁵ CCC, 2335, cf, 369.

⁶ CCC, 239.

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Dives in Misericordia*, On the Mercy of God, 8.

⁸ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (On Reconciliation and Penance) [RP] 5, 6.

On his return, the welcome he received was far beyond anything he had imagined. It is, as someone once remarked to me, 'the story of a father's jubilant forgiveness'. The father was not just hoping for his return; he was running out to meet him. The son hoped that he might be allowed to live in his father's house as a servant. Instead, he was dressed in the best robe and a ring was placed on his finger, marking his restoration as a son of the household. A feast was organised because, "this son of man was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found".

The second son, a much less adventurous type, was not a bit pleased at this turn of events. Nobody had ever made that kind of fuss about him, even though, unlike his brother, he had lived a blameless life. He was angry and refused to go in.

Again the father left his house and went out, this time to find the elder brother. He wanted to assure him that he too was loved: "You are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right that we should celebrate".

When he saw the younger son returning, bruised and humiliated by his experiences, the father was "filled with compassion". When he saw that the elder brother was aggrieved, he was anxious to bring him also into the family celebration. That was his fundamental attitude to both of his sons.

Unconditional Love

Whatever his sons did, the attitude of the father in the parable remained unshakeable – he was their father. That is what God is like. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ describes himself as, "God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in faithful love and constancy" (Ex 34:6).

Even when people are called, like the prodigal son, to make painful, humiliating, and perhaps lengthy, journeys back, God continues to offer a welcome: "I will punish their offences with the rod... but I will never take back my love" (Ps 89:33).

God is utterly reliable and untiringly faithful. His words and promises will be fulfilled (Num 23:19). He remains unshakeably the Father. He does not change (Mal 3:6) in spite of anything people do, he is willing to receive them.

That is why the Year of the Father is also the year of the sacrament of Penance, the sacrament of the Father's ready welcome and jubilant forgiveness. There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Lk 15:7) because one of the Father's children was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found.

But the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation cannot be understood simply in terms of the ceremony which takes place in the church or at a sickbed.

A Sign of Reconciliation

Our whole life as a believing community is meant to be, as it were, a sacrament of reconciliation – a sign and an instrument of the merciful love of God in the world⁹. That is true first of all because of what the Church is – a community of people who believe and hope in the mercy of God and who are called to continue Christ's work and proclaim his Good News.

The Year of the Father is an invitation to come home to the Father. It is an invitation to realise that coming home to our Father is what Christian living is all about:

"The whole of the Christian life is like a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father, whose unconditional love for every human creature, and in particular for the 'prodigal son' we can discover anew every day"¹⁰.

⁹ RP, 11.

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, (On Preparation for the Jubilee) [TMA], 49.

That invitation is not issued simply from pulpits and through pastoral letters. Those who approach the sacrament of Penance are forgiven by God. They are at the same time restored to the family of the Church which works for their restoration “by charity, example and by prayer”¹¹.

The Year of the Father is a time for renewing our efforts to be the kind of community which, like the father of the prodigal, goes out to meet those who need to know that they are welcome. Do people who have drifted away from a sense of belonging to the Church, or people whose lives have led them into situations out of harmony with the values to which the Church tries to witness, or people involved in disputes and tensions between themselves, or people who are strangers among us, see in us a love which is welcoming, unshakeable, longing to forgive, to reconcile, to unite?

Do young people looking for full participation in the life of the parish and of society, people who are bereaved, people for whom the moral teaching of the Church is a particular challenge, people who have a difficult economic struggle, or who have their own crises to meet in their family life, find in their parish “a fraternal and welcoming family home, where those who have been baptised and confirmed become aware of forming the People of God”¹²?

These are some of the questions that we have been putting to ourselves during the Listening Process. In the coming year, as we try to respond to some of these needs, it will be important to remember the awesome meaning of what we are trying to do. We are trying to be what God has called us to be. The God who made himself known as a mysterious presence on Mount Sinai and in the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple, the God who revealed himself in his only Son made flesh, is now present in the Church. Jesus comes with his Father to make their home in each one who accepts him (Jn 14:23).

It is our task, in the coming year, to try to make more visible the Father’s love present within us. It should be possible to see reflected in us the power, the tenderness, the welcome, the jubilant forgiveness of the Father’s mercy.

Freedom and Slavery

To find ourselves in the parable, we need to look more closely at the two brothers. The story is really about the failure of either of them to understand his father. Both had failed to grasp how all embracing and unconditional his love was.

The younger man saw life in his father’s house as a restricting thing. ‘If I could be free of it’, he thought, ‘I could build my own life the way I would like to have it’. But the kind of life he envisaged was unrealistic and illusory. “He squandered his money on a life of debauchery”. Very quickly, of course, the money was gone, along with the friends he thought he had made.

Sometimes a situation can seem limiting. What is certain, however, is that it is even more frustrating to try to live an illusion. That is what Dorothy Parker called ‘the flaw in paganism’:

Drink and dance and laugh and lie,
Love the reeling midnight through,
For tomorrow we shall die!
(But alas, we never do.)

We may try to live without a thought for the meaning or the consequences of our actions, but there is a meaning, and there are repercussions – at least on ourselves – beyond the immediate moment.

Thus it sometimes happens that, when we think we are freeing ourselves we are actually becoming trapped – by possessions, by setting out on a path that is lacking in integrity, by deceit, by ambition. What starts out looking like freedom can end up looking like slavery.

¹¹ VATICAN II, *Lumen Gentium*, (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), 11.

¹² JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesi Tradendae* (On Catechesis in our Time), 67.

More importantly, the young man saw his life as restricting precisely because he did not understand his father's love. His life became a burden because it was merely a duty.

The same thing can happen in our approach to Christian living:

Those who live "by the flesh" experience God's law as a burden, and indeed as a denial or at least a restriction of their own freedom. On the other hand, those who are impelled by love and "walk by the Spirit" (Gal 5:16), and who desire to serve others, find in God's Law the fundamental and necessary way in which to practise love as something freely chosen and freely lived out"¹³.

For the prodigal son, his relationship with his father was a burden, an arrangement. He began by demanding that the value of his inheritance should be calculated in terms of "the share of the estate that will come to me". It was as if his relationship with his father was an economic asset that could be cashed in.

After all his disastrous experiences he began to come to his senses. He recognised that he had to set out on a return journey, a pilgrimage to the house of the father. But he still did not understand his father's unconditional love. He returned thinking in terms of a calculation, a negotiation: "treat me as one of your hired hands".

The father would have none of it. The son was not even allowed to make the proposal. The issue was not what the son had done or what he deserved. *Nothing the son could do would alter who the father was.* Whatever had happened, he remained a father and therefore the young man never ceased to be a son.

The bargaining and the calculation completely missed the point. This was not about what was owned or earned or owed. It was about a relationship that the father could never abandon or deny. This year is a time when the Church is called to try to proclaim the Father's unchangingly welcoming love.

I hope that in this pastoral letter and in the life of the parish and diocese, you may hear the echo of a personal call from the Father, whose love for you never wavers.

Fathering is not something God does; it is who he is. God never abandons or denies anyone in this life. God's love draws everybody, including those of whom we are tempted to despair, or those of whom we most strongly disapprove, to his home. There we hope to join them.

"I Have Never Disobeyed."

That thought would have been too much for the elder brother. For him, it was clear that there were some people, like his irresponsible brother, who had put themselves beyond the reach of forgiveness.

He had no sense that he had a journey to make. There he was in his father's house. It was something he took for granted. It was something he had earned: "All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any order of yours".

He too was thinking in terms of a bargain or an arrangement. His life was a burden for which he deserved payment. He deserved the fatted calf more than someone who had so obviously disgraced himself.

He missed the point every bit as comprehensively as his brother. His work record would, perhaps, have made him a reliable hired hand. ***It was not what made him a son.***

The father's love for both was unconditional. He loved them because he was their father. Each of them had to make a journey, a pilgrimage, in order to discover that unconditional love anew.

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, *Veritatis Splendor*, (On Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church's Moral Teaching) 18.

We are sons and daughters of God *because he is our Father*, not because of how good our behaviour has been. Everything – our freedom, our talents, our ability to do anything at all – is his gift. Nothing we do can impress the God who created all we have and are and know! We can do nothing to place God in our debt. Rather we are meant to discover anew each day the unconditional love of the Father for every human creature.

That is why it misses the point to say, as one sometimes hears said, ‘If you are just and kind and honest, that’s the main thing; that’s what being a Christian is all about’. Being a Christian is first of all about knowing that we are on a pilgrimage to the house of our Father who loves us unconditionally. It is about knowing that we can call God ‘Abba’ because the Spirit of God has been poured into our hearts (Rom 8: 14-17).

The elder son, for all his conscientiousness, virtuous behaviour, depends on his father’s generosity every bit as much as the younger son. The father’s extravagantly generous love is a reproach to both of them. That is the lesson of the parable.

“And” not “But”

We are tempted, in speaking of God’s unconditional love, to introduce a ‘but’. ‘God loves you, *but* you have to repent. God loves you *but* you have to keep the commandments:’ the ‘but’ seems to suggest that if we sin, God will no longer love us. That is what the elder brother thinks: ‘surely the father’s love cannot extend to somebody who has acted so selfishly and so irresponsibly!’ That too is what the younger brother thinks: ‘my father will never treat me as he used to before I made such a mess of my life’.

The lesson of the parable is that it is the sinner who changes, not God. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is Father with his whole unchangeable Being. Nothing that a creature does or fails to do can change who He is. God’s unwavering love calls us to make a pilgrimage to the house of the Father.

From the first realisation that he could return, through the journey home, the jubilantly forgiving welcome, and no doubt in the years that lay ahead, the younger son grew in understanding of his father. Life at home was now no longer a burden but a loving, unselfish, loyal response which tried to reflect the lavishly unlimited love he had received.

After the shock of seeing a love that had no ‘buts’, a love which never falters, perhaps the elder brother too entered on a journey of growth in understanding of his father. Perhaps he too came to a response motivated not by calculation and self-interest but by a sense of loving gratitude. Perhaps he began to learn that what he had received was not a payment he had earned but a gift which had not, and could never have, deserved.

There is no limit to the demands which the unconditional love of God makes on us. We are to love him with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength (Dt 6:5). We are to love one another as Jesus loves us (Jn 13:34), in other words, just as the Father loves him (Jn 15:9). There is no higher standard and all of us fall infinitely short of it.

The relationship of God’s love to the way we should live is not a ‘but’ but an ‘and therefore’. God loves us unconditionally *and therefore*, like the prodigal son, we are called to change the way we live; we must arise and go to the Father who welcomes us. God loves us unconditionally *and therefore*, like the elder brother, we ought to rejoice at the generosity of that love even, or rather *especially*, when it is lavished on those of whom we are tempted to disapprove.

God loves us unconditionally, *and therefore* we must be ready to forgive even those who most grievously hurt us. God loves us unconditionally *and therefore* we must refrain from exploiting or deceiving, or defrauding, or despising, or abandoning and of the sons and daughters whom he loves. God loves us unconditionally, *and therefore* we must be ready to forgive as generously as he is willing to forgive us (Lk 11: 3, 4; Mt 8: 23 -35).

That love reproaches us, challenges us, judges us, not because the Father has turned his back on us, but because he would never turn his back on us. We have fallen short of the love of a Father who longs to welcome our return:

“When we realize that God's love for us does not cease in the face of our sin or recoil before our offenses, but becomes even more attentive and generous; when we realize that this love went so far as cause the passion and death of the Word made flesh who consented to redeem us at the price of his own blood, then we exclaim in gratitude: "Yes, the Lord is rich in mercy, and even: 'The Lord is mercy'".¹⁴

God is Love

The coming year will bring us to the threshold of the third millennium. It is a year for reflecting on the most profound and awesome truth: “God is love” (Jn 4: 8, 16).

The whole being of the Father is his giving of his entire self to the Son. That act of self-giving, that Fathering, is who he is. The entire life of the Trinity is an unlimited flow in which the infinite nature of God is given and received without any holding back. The same divine nature belongs totally to Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The fundamental message of the Gospel is that we have been made sons and daughters of God: “The Spirit himself joins our spirit to bear witness that we are children of God... heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, provided that we share his suffering so as to share his glory” (Rom 8: 16, 17).

We live in a world which is uncomfortable with silence and solitude. We often feel caught in frenetic activity; we are perpetually busy. But we are not good at asking what it is all for. It is a world which is interested in everything about the life of the Church except the question of whether that fundamental message is true and the question of what the implications of that truth might be.

We are meant to be a sign in the world of that truth. That is why we are called to love our neighbour – not so that we can impress God but so that we can share the love we have received.

Our first task is to learn the lessons that the two brothers were taught, the lesson that our Father's love is infinitely greater than we know. That is where our pilgrimage to the house of our Father begins. That is the first step in living out the vocation and mission that the Father has entrusted to us.

¹⁵“This pilgrimage [to the house of the Father] takes place in the heart of each person, extends to the believing community and then reaches the whole of humanity”

¹⁴ RP, 22

¹⁵ TMA, 29.



LIMERICK DIOCESAN JUBILEE LOGO

The design is reminiscent of a stained glass window. No human being has seen or is able to see God the Father who dwells in inaccessible light (I Tim 6:16), but he promised that his light would shine in the world: "For you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will shine out with healing in its rays" (Mal 3:20).

The light of God the Father shines in our world above all through Jesus Christ. The Cross is a symbol of the Passion and Death of Jesus. The sun which surrounds the centre of the Cross proclaims the Resurrection. The Celtic Cross is also a reminder of those who have believed in Christ during a millennium and a half of Irish history.



The rays at the top of the logo recall the presence of the Holy Spirit who came on the infant Church like tongues of flame. The same Spirit sends us to preach the Gospel, to grow in unity with one another and to play our part in his work of renewing the face of the earth: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).



The lower half of the logo can be seen as representing a chalice or a ciborium. It is a reminder that "the Year 2000 will be intensely Eucharistic: in the *Sacrament of the Eucharist* the Saviour, who took flesh in Mary's womb twenty centuries ago, continues to offer himself to humanity as the source of divine life" (Pope John Paul, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* 55).



The upper half of the design can be seen as portraying the dawn: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Lk 1:78,79).

As a new millennium dawns, "let faith be refreshed, let hope increase and let charity exert itself still more (Pope John Paul in the Bull *The Mystery of the Incarnation* introducing the Great Jubilee).

May we learn to hope in the dawning of the eternal day of rest for which God created heaven and earth (Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 314).

[The logo was designed by Enda Griffin of the Limerick Diocesan Pastoral Centre]

SAINT PATRICK'S CREED

There is not, there never was, nor will there ever be
any other God than God the Father,
never begotten, without any beginning.
From him comes every beginning ,
everything that exists is his, as we have been taught:
and his Son Jesus Christ,
whom we declare to have been with the Father always,
begotten spiritually by the Father in a manner beyond description,
before the origin of the world,
before any beginning.
And by him are made what is visible and what is invisible.
He was made man,
conquered death and was received into heaven by the Father,
who gave him all power over all names
whether in heaven or on earth or beneath the earth
and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord and God.
In him we believe,
and we await his coming soon
to judge the living and the dead,
who will repay each one according to his deeds.
He poured out plentifully on us
the Holy Spirit, the gift and the pledge of immortality,
who made of those who obey and believe
children of God and co-heirs with Christ:
whom we confess and adore,
one God in the Trinity of the holy name.
(Confessions, 4)

A PRAYER TO GOD THE FATHER

You who are above everything,
how is it possible to praise you?
How can words praise you?
How can a mind perceive you?
You alone are beyond words:
and yet you have created everything that can be expressed.
You alone are unknowable:
and yet you have created everything that can be known.
All beings praise you with a clear voice,
both those who speak and those which cannot speak.
All beings celebrate you,
both those who think and those which are incapable of thought.
Around you, indeed, are gathered
all the desires and all the sufferings of every creature.
All beings pray to you:
every creature which can read the signs of your presence
raises up to you a silent hymn of praise.

(St Gregory Nazianzus)