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**St Andrew's, Pimville, Soweto**  
**28 February 2010**

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Lent 2, Yr C: Gen 22:1-18, Ps 116:11-16, Rom 8:31b-34, Luke 9:28-36

May I speak in the name of God the Father, who gave up his Son for us all – and raised him to new life by the power of the same Spirit that is at work in us. Amen.

Normally, when I visit a parish, I begin my sermons by greeting my 'dear brothers and sisters in Christ'.

When I come here, I have to change my approach – I have to say, not only 'Dear brothers and sisters in Christ' but also 'Dear Mothers and Fathers in Christ'.

For here in St Andrew's, even dressed as an Archbishop, I feel something of an impostor – to be at the front, leading the service, among so many of you, who have known me for so many years!

When I hear people whispering to one another, 'The Archbishop is our child', then I really feel put in my place!

In today's readings, the place of a child may seem very uncomfortable indeed.

First, Isaac's father comes within a whisker of killing his son, the son who he claims to love.

As they climb the mountain, Isaac dares to ask 'Where is the lamb?' and I can hardly bear to imagine what must have passed through his imagination as his father tied him up, and laid him on the wood prepared for the burnt sacrifice.

Then we heard St Paul write of another father and son.

He tells of a Father who goes one step further, and actually does give up his Son to death. We wonder how a God who is said to be all-powerful and all-loving can actually stand by and do nothing.

This is, after all, the same Father who has reassured his child, as St Luke's gospel tells us, with the words 'This is my Son, whom I have chosen.'

In contrast to Isaac, we know rather more of this Son's perspective on his Father's actions, in this story, and I shall return to it later.

But let me concentrate first on questions of fatherhood.

Human fathers come in every possible variety.

Some are a joy to know, an example and encouragement to us.

Others, alas, are less than what they might be. Some are downright abusive parents. And some are either invisible or completely absent.

But all of them are human – and none of them are perfect!

Even with the best ones, we may have personality clashes, or rivalries or misunderstandings, and may find ambiguities in the way we view them.

Yet our understanding of God, whom we call our Father in heaven, is often shaped by our experiences of our earthly Fathers.

If we had a stern disciplinarian as our earthly father, we may picture God as essentially judgemental.

If we had a demanding earthly father, we may think that God is always on our case, always asking more of us.

If our earthly father could not be relied upon and did not keep his word, we may find that subconsciously we assume that God and his promises are similarly untrustworthy.

If our earthly father abandoned us, perhaps deep down we expect God to do the same.

And if our earthly father claimed to love us, but actually abused us, emotionally, or physically, or even sexually – well, you can imagine how that might shape our ability to comprehend a loving heavenly Father.

Even if we can draw a positive picture in our minds, nonetheless our hearts and souls may be in turmoil whenever we hear God described as Father.

I wonder if you have ever taken the time to sit and ponder how the image of God which you have, is tangled up with the way you view your earthly father?

Of course, it may be coloured by your mother, or some other authority figure, but it tends to be our fathers who most shape the way we think about God.

As many of you know, my relationship with my own father was not always easy.

When I was very small, I looked up to him as my hero.

Later I felt he had failed me and failed our family:

- he failed when he was unable to prevent our forced removal from Alex to Pimville,
- he failed when he lost his temper and hit my mother and me,
- he failed when he took refuge in another relationship and raised another family in secret.

Of course, as a teenager, I did not realise how much of this was beyond his control, or how much strain he was under, or how he also wrestled with feelings of failure to provide for and protect his family as he felt he ought.

Since then, I have learnt to step back, and not to look at God with the same critical, mistrusting, eyes.

By daring to call God 'my Father' and grow in my relationship with him, I have come to experience – not only in my head, but in my heart and soul – the truth of his perfect love and compassion to me.

Not only has my picture of God changed, but so has my picture of my earthly father. I have learnt to look at his memory with far greater love and compassion than I could have believed when I was a boy.

What made the difference was daring to take risks with these pains from my past.

First, I dared to pause, and look honestly at the hurts in my relationship with my own father.

And then I had to dare to believe that my heavenly Father really was as trustworthy and loving as others claimed, and as I was beginning to discover – and to bring this woundedness to him.

I dared to be vulnerable before God, and let down my barriers of self-protection.

Then I found God's unconditional, overwhelming, love and compassion were able to connect with me – my head, my heart, and the very deepest parts of my being.

This is the first lesson I want to draw from our readings today – the challenge to take the time, and dare to ponder before God your relationship with your earthly father, and the impact it has on your understanding of your Father in heaven.

Dare to bring to God the struggles, the difficulties, the regrets, the pains – even, perhaps, the guilt of not loving your father as you feel you ought. And let God soak you in his love and tenderness, and bring healing to your heart and soul.

It may be something you need to do by degrees, taking different aspects, and coming to God in this way a number of times as he gradually works his healing and wholeness in you.

Let this be one of your Lenten disciplines this year.

But perhaps you want to ask me how this theme of the Fatherhood of God really relates to the season of Lent.

Lent is of course the forty days, plus Sundays, that recalls Jesus' 40 days of temptation in the wilderness.

This comes immediately after Jesus' baptism, when, as St Luke tells us, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove, and he heard a voice from heaven saying 'You are my Son, the Beloved.'

And the question at the heart of Jesus' time in the wilderness is ultimately this: What does it mean to be the Son of God?

To understand his own identity, he has to wrestle also with the identity of the Father, whose Son he is.

As we heard in last Sunday's readings, Jesus responds to the devil's three temptations with three assertions about God, about the nature of his Father in heaven.

First, is the response that 'Man does not live by bread alone.' This verse is from Deuteronomy (Deut 8:3), and continues, 'but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'

Our Father in heaven is the one who sustains us, who resources our life, on whom we can and must depend for our very being. He provides the 'daily bread' for our bodies, our hearts, our minds, our souls.

Second, he alone is worthy of our worship and the service of our lives.

Third, we are not to put him to the test – we are not to play fast and loose with his promises, as if they can be twisted to our own personal, egocentric advantage.

In Lent we must similarly wrestle with what it is to be the beloved children of our Father in heaven, united with his Son in baptism, indwelt by his Spirit.

We need to pause and make sure that we have not lost sight of what it is to know our Father in heaven as the provider of our daily bread – on whose love, and in whose promises, we can and must depend for our very being.

In the same way, in Lent we focus on what it means to worship and serve only God, as Jesus tells us, and to trust in God's promises on God's terms, not ours.

We do this year by year, as our life unfolds, and our circumstances change with time.

We may find that new challenges along life's journey. Therefore Lent and Easter – when we reaffirm our baptism vows – is the chance to revisit our commitments to God, and his commitments to us, in the light of where we now find ourselves.

Returning to today's gospel, we read how, as Jesus' ministry unfolded and the nature of what it meant to be God's beloved Son became more sharp, that his dialogue with his Father in heaven continued.

In today's gospel, in the story of the Transfiguration, we have Jesus making time to pray.

And again we hear the Father affirming Jesus: 'This is my Son, whom I have chosen'.

The voice comes after Jesus has spoken with Moses and Elijah – discussing, says St Luke, the fulfilment he would bring at Jerusalem.

Jesus has come to recognise that he himself is the fulfilment of all that God has spoken through the Law and through the Prophets – symbolised by Moses and Elijah.

He has realised that the means of this fulfilment is through his ‘departure’ – in other words, through his death, and that this would come soon.

I wonder how fully he had understood this, at the time of his temptation in the wilderness.

Now he is faced with the prospect far more starkly – and he is prepared to continue depending on God, putting his future into God’s hands, on God’s terms. He says ‘yes’ to this future, even if it means death.

This is when the cloud comes over them – a cloud like the cloud Moses knew, the cloud of the presence of God – and the voice says ‘This is my Son, whom I have chosen’.

It is the affirmation that Jesus has rightly understood the life to which he is called; the life for which he has been chosen; the life that leads inevitably to death in Jerusalem.

Then the voice tells the disciples – Peter, James and John, but also all of us who follow Jesus today: ‘Listen to him, listen to Jesus’.

This brings me to the heart of my second theme of this morning.

In Lent, we not only reflect on who our Father in Heaven actually is – and now also we reflect on what it is to be his child, in the same way that Jesus was his child.

Jesus was beloved, Jesus was chosen – and so are we.

And Jesus was trusting, and Jesus was obedient – obedient even unto death, as St Paul writes to the Philippians (Phil 2:8).

We know, from Jesus’ wrestling in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, that this obedience was no simple and easy matter.

But in Jesus stuck with obedience – because he knew his Father in Heaven well enough to keep on trusting him, to keep on depending on him, and to believe that even in death itself, God’s love would prevail.

Even though on the cross, Jesus cried out ‘Why have you forsaken me?’ his final words reflect his conviction that God’s good and perfect will had been achieved. ‘It is finished’ he said – words which equally mean ‘It is completed.’

So Lent is a time for listening to Jesus, as the voice of our heavenly Father commands us.

It is a time for listening to what Scripture tells us of his life, his ministry, his obedience, his trust, his death – and how his trust was vindicated in the resurrection, a victory he won for us all.

Returning to our two different stories of Sons and Fathers, we now see not only that our Father in heaven gave his Son up for us, but that the Son freely gave himself up for us also.

Therefore the question now for us, is whether we are ready to give ourselves up also.

Are we committed to putting our trust wholly in God, no matter what we face; to depend utterly on him; to pray ‘not my will, but yours’?

What might this mean for us in practice?

Well, we do not know what the future brings – but we are challenged to step forward into tomorrow with confidence, not trusting in our past, but in God’s leading, and Jesus’ companionship on the journey.

In our personal lives, this may mean many things – and of course, all of us must face the reality of our own mortality. Yet we can dare to do so, with trust and hope.

We may also ask what this means for us as a parish. Unconditional trust for the future can be hard for a church which has a strong historic identity, as St Andrew’s has. And let me at this point congratulate you a little early on the 80th birthday celebrations you will enjoy later this year!

But the old days have gone – the politics of the past, the days of dances and debates.

Society around us has changed, and goes on changing. Life-styles continue to evolve.

Change of itself is neither automatically good nor automatically bad – and the same is true of changes within the life of a church.

What matters most is that we live in ways that, in these contexts, help one another to put Jesus at the centre of our lives, and his gospel at the centre of our proclamation.

In Lent, as well as asking afresh how clearly we are ourselves listening to Jesus, we must also ask how well we are helping others to listen to Jesus.

For example, in the ways we 'do church', are we 'speaking a language' that those around us can clearly hear?

What does the gospel say to the needs of our communities today and tomorrow?

Where must we preach Jesus through showing the same loving care to those in need?

How shall we be ministers of God's reconciling love – building bridges, working with others, creating networks through which his love can flow?

All these are questions for me too, as Archbishop.

Though I follow a line of great men, my calling is not to copy them – or rather, only to copy them where they were committed to listening to Jesus, and helping others listen to him. How I do that will be unique to the circumstances of today and tomorrow.

Please keep me in your prayers as I wrestle with these questions for my own ministry.

So, finally, dear people of St Andrews, may you have a blessed Lent, knowing yourselves the beloved and chosen children of your Father in heaven.

May you grow in knowledge and love of him; and grow in listening to his Son, who was obedient to death, and who is now at the Father's right hand, interceding for us all.

May God bless you, and make you a blessing to others.

Amen