

## Ephesians 1: 3 – 14

Do you prefer Christmas cards with a personalised 3 line message for you on it, or one with a round robin letter telling you all the family news of the previous 12 months.

Most of the letters in the New Testament were to individual churches: and they include personal references. So the letter to the church at Holmbury might say: Greet Francis and Martha, for their labour in the Lord is a source of joy to me.

But Ephesians is more of a round robin, a letter to all the churches in the area, and would get passed on from one church to the next. And so it is less personal in its content. And it is really in 2 parts: first, it is urging all believers to take heart from their position as children of God, and the second is very much advice on practical Christian living

And today's reading was in the 1<sup>st</sup> part: where Paul writes 'God chose you to become his adopted children'.

Nowadays the main aim of adoption is to place a child in a loving family, but Roman adoption was more to do with making sure you had an heir. If you didn't have an heir, then you lost your land and wealth. Sometimes children died young. And then adoption might be the only solution. Not uncommonly, a childless nobleman went down to the slave market and adopted one to become his child. You may remember this happening in the fictional film of Ben Hur, when a Roman of high standing adopted the galley slave, Ben Hur, as his son.

The moment the adoption was legalised, 3 things happened. And all 3 have spiritual counterpart, which I urge us to work out for ourselves:

- (1) The newly adopted child immediately took on the status and legal rights of his new family. If he or she had had the status of a slave, he or she now had the status of child of a nobleman.
- (2) **The adopted son became an heir to his new father's estate. No more and no fewer rights than any natural-born son.**
- (3) **The former life of the adoptee was completely erased. That included any outstanding debts, obligations, even punishments due.**

So, on 5 occasions, Paul wrote to Christians who might be facing persecution to draw strength from their status as adopted children of God. At this point, we're going to move from theory to practice, as it were, and I'm going to ask Martha a few questions about her experience of adopting children:

### ***(a) When you decided to adopt, did you have any qualms ?***

It's was a gradual decision, as it became apparent that God didn't seem to be answering our prayers for home grown children. We really wanted the joy of caring for children and watching them grow and develop, and we felt there were things we could offer them: security, education, fun and love.

As for qualms, we had plenty. There were virtually no healthy babies available, so we knew any child we took on would be older, might have physical or mental disabilities, and would almost certainly come with emotional baggage. And adoption is a very long process, with countless interviews, forms and frustrations. So in the end one had to be quite determined and resilient.

***(b) In what ways is being the parent of an adopted child exactly the same as being the parent of a child you've given birth to ?***

In many ways you have exactly the same joys, difficulties and frustrations, particularly when the children are young. I remember the comment from another adoptive parent: "You know your children are really yours when you stop thinking they're adopted and start thinking, 'These kids are a real pain in the neck'". That's very true. They are naughty and cheeky, as well as being funny, loving and caring. They have friends, have ups and downs at school and love seeing their grandparents. Much of the time you forget that you didn't actually give birth to them and it doesn't seem to occur to them that we aren't their real family.

***(c) In what ways is being the parent of an adopted child different from being the parent of a child you've given birth to ?***

There are a number of differences. One immediate issue was their insecurity and tendency to cling to me when we were out and about. First days at school and visits to friends' houses could be quite traumatic. Also, it gradually became apparent that some of their personalities differed from mine and Mike's, and their interests and talents often surprised us. None are academic but they tend to be good with their hands. I'm completely unartistic so continue to be amazed at Ian's excellent drawings and paintings and Scott's woodworking skills. Both Mike and I have poor eyesight, while Gareth has incredible hand-eye coordination and both he and Lawrence are brilliant at tennis and football.

Most people have emotional/identity problems at adolescence, but it is more complicated for adopted children, as they start to wonder about their birth families and question where and how they belong. This takes its toll: there can be confusion, anger and rebellion; and a couple of the boys really went off the rails. This is painful for everyone, but through all the times of despair and even disappointment, you know they are yours, and you never stop loving them.

***(d) Paul talks about God deciding to adopt us to himself. In what ways does your own experience of adopting help you to understand God's feelings towards us ?***

One thing that adoption has taught me, particularly when the children are being difficult, is the meaning of unconditional love, and for that I am extremely grateful. Paul says that the Father chose us and destined us for adoption. We also chose our children, as

six year old Scott once reminded me when I was complaining about everyone's impossible behaviour: "Well" he said, "You chose us, so you're stuck with us". He was right.

God is similarly stuck with us, and he refuses to give up. There have been times when my children have quarreled with us, rebelled and run off, even times when they have said they didn't want to be part of our family. But that has made absolutely no difference to the way I feel about them. They will always be my children and nothing could stop me from loving them as my own children. And I know that to them, I am their mother and Mike is their father.

In the same way, God has adopted us. We are all sinful and unworthy, but he doesn't give up, because we are his children and a father does not give up on his family. There are times when he weeps at our behaviour but nothing can stop him from loving us as his own children, brothers and sisters of his Son Jesus.

We all know this but perhaps my children have done me the favour of really demonstrating what it means. That's another thing that I will always love them for.