

*So the story goes, according to one 1924 version: a Irish peat-cutter in the wilds of Connemara was once asked by an Englishman for directions to the village of Letterfrack. Generously, the Irishman walks him to the top of a nearby hill overlooking the surrounding bogs, lakes, and mountains and proceeds to give a long and detailed description of the route which ends this way: 'Tis the devil's own country, sorr, to find your way in. But a gintleman with a face like your honour's can't miss the road; though, if it was meself that was going to Letterfrack, faith, I wouldn't start from here.'

'I wouldn't start from here': but we don't always have the choice of where we start from, even if it would be more convenient to start elsewhere. Our starting point today is that it's Father's Day, and it would seem to me churlish to ignore it, even if it isn't really part of the Church's official calendar.

*In some Mediterranean Catholic countries the 19th March, St Joseph's day, can be a day to celebrate fathers, although tellingly St Joseph is also remembered on International Worker's Day, May 1st and so his role as a patron of workers is perhaps as, if not more, important than his celebration of fatherhood. In a few countries father's day is conflated with soldier's day and the defence of the father land. In fact, we have the North Americans to thank for what we now know as Father's Day and it's rather a poignant story.

*The first stirrings of it date back only to 1908 when a Father's Day service was held in a Methodist church in Fairmont West Virginia to memorialise the deaths of 361 men who were killed in America's largest mining accident. 250 of the men were fathers and their deaths left around a thousand children in the area bereaved.

*The event wasn't repeated but coincidentally the next year, 1909, a woman called Sonora Smart Dodd was attending church and heard a sermon about mother's day – another festival being newly invigorated in the Americas. Sonora's own mother had died when she was 16 whilst giving birth to her sixth child, leaving Sonora and her brothers to be raised by her father, an American Civil War veteran named William Jackson Smart. Sonora was William's only daughter and clearly very close to her father, and listening to the sermon she

felt that there should be a day for celebrating men like her father, too. So she began to campaign for this, without much success at first.

*It wasn't until the 1930s that her campaign started to take off, in large part because she managed to persuade the Associated Men's Wear Retailers organisation of New York to promote the celebration. Sensing a money-making opportunity they did, leading early critics to see Father's Day as an advertising gimmick – a criticism many still articulate. In 1966 President Lyndon Johnson issued a presidential proclamation honouring fathers and designating the third Sunday of June as father's day; six years later Richard Nixon made it a national holiday.

Well, such are the curious beginnings of a day that now shares a similar popularity to Christmas, and possibly in our culture is more celebrated than Easter; a day that combines fond sentimentality and shameless commercialisation in equal measure.

*I wouldn't choose to start from here: for alongside the dubious question of commercialisation, there are some tricky issues around fathers. The Latin word for father is 'pater' and from that we get the noun 'paternalism' and the adjective 'paternalistic'; from the Greek we get the word 'patriarchy' meaning 'the rule of the fathers'. These are not positive words: they suggest the dismissive control of others, especially of women but also of children. And our caution about these words is grounded in some awful truths: most murders of women are by the men in their lives; the majority of sexual abuse is committed within a family setting by male elders. In the wider sense patriarchy, the rule of fathers, has not been good news. And yet this truth sits alongside another: not all men are like this, not all fathers are like this. Following in the line of Sonora's own deep affection for her single-parent father, there is plenty to celebrate in good fathering.

It is curious that Father's Day, has taken so long to come about, and perhaps that reflects the fact that the emotional accessibility of men to their children is still a work in progress.

*What does Jesus say about fathers? Well, here it's clear that he doesn't have a lot of positive things to say: 'call no one father,' he is recorded as saying once: don't automatically

give elder men status, 'you have only one Father': God. When Peter talks with Jesus about the cost of discipleship, Jesus replies, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake ... who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life." Notice he doesn't say that the disciples will regain their fathers.

*Of course, there are speculations around Jesus's own relationship with Joseph which, if you accept as historical the traditional story of the Virgin Birth, could potentially have led to some interesting family dynamics as he grew up. In the Middle Ages Joseph often appears in the famous Mystery Plays as an elderly cuckolded father, the butt of knowing jokes.

*Where Jesus does use the word 'father' in a positive sense it is in one particular place and it seems pretty distinctive to him: it's in his relationship with God. As is well known, he speaks to God using the word 'abba' – probably not quite 'Daddy', but certainly the normal everyday word for father. Jesus doesn't call God 'Lord' or 'God', he uses the word 'father'.

Jesus seems to have been soaked in that relationship with his eternal Father in such a way that it set his whole being free: as a man he does not need to dominate or control; he is unaffected by flattery or abuse: he rests in that relationship with his Father.

*We have little hints of how he did that, taking himself away early in the morning or at night to be alone with God in a way that nourished and re-grounded him. And, of course, we get a further hint at the content of that relationship in the prayer he teaches his disciples: the 'Our Father' or Lord's prayer: and this suggests an easy relationship – a letting go, a trusting, which in teaching he clearly wishes his followers to experience and be shaped by, too.

*Out of Jesus's relationship with his Father comes a way of being with others that is empowering of excluded women and men, an extraordinary and very unusual attention for children, and a way which challenges the assumed power of male elites by refusing to get sucked into their cliques or their power games.

*Jesus's relationship with God as father is one that does not lead to dominating authority, it leads to warm embrace. Just think of the way that Jesus describes this in the behaviour of the father in the parable of the prodigal son, running to embrace rather than remaining coldly aloof. The quality of God's fatherhood in this parable is nicely captured in Rembrandt's famous depiction, in which it's often pointed out that the hands of the father figure are both masculine and feminine. The quality of fathering that Jesus seems to endorse is, in short, one that would have been quite different from the stern Jewish or Roman head of the household, the 'paterfamilias'.

*Men, on average, have greater upper physical body strength; psychologically they are, on average, more likely to be risk-takers; they are, on average, more likely to be assertive and challenging; the number of words men say a day is actually about the same as a woman, but the vocabulary men use leans more towards objects and processes and away from relationships and emotions. Cumulatively, these and many other factors which are probably grounded in the evolutionally story of the survival of our species, feeds into the reality that men more easily respond to conflict with physical violence. As far as I know, male violence is, and has been, a major issue in every culture. Teaching men to control their violence, making fathers safe, is and has been a major feature of all world religions.

It is an ongoing struggle and complex, in part because religion itself is so powerful – and so a tool for curtailing the power of men can easily flip over to become a tool for enabling it – something we see in every case of male clergy sexual abuse.

*I had the pleasure of interviewing the historian Tom Holland a couple of year back about his book *Dominion*, in which he tries to remind us about the deep (and often forgotten) Christian roots of many modern values. Tom would trace many of the very modern trends in blurring gender norms, in questioning unhealthy gender stereotypes, as rooted in this Jesus tradition of rejecting patriarchy.

*In the middle-ages the church tried to implement Jesus's reshaping of male authority by inventing chivalry: if as a man you are going to sit on a horse and wield a sword, its best to

be guided by a set of rules that limit that violence – ultimately you should do so only to protect the weak. Out of that, to our minds perhaps, strange experiment emerged the idea of ‘the gentleman’. A gentleman was a man of good breeding, but his status was shown not by his ability to wield unbounded power, but by his ability to exercise self-control – the ideal gentleman was one who embodied a quality that gave rise to the word ‘gentleness’.

In our gospel we find Jesus calling a group of men; we have to work harder at uncovering Jesus’ closeness to women, though it is there with Martha and Mary, for example; and in Paul’s letters there are hints of women holding authority as apostles. But, I imagine, some of Jesus’ work with those twelve men involved reshaping their ideas about what maleness meant, challenging patriarchy – the automatic rule of the father. Jesus taught them and modelled for them a groundedness in God, not in society’s status.

*In a similar but expanded way, Paul’s letter talks about being ‘justified by faith’ – by which he means finding ultimate security not in personal success, in power, or skill, or social standing, but simply in trusting in God’s love towards us. ‘Faith’ is resting in God’s love and therefore not needing to be competitive, violent, or aggressive.

*As the Irish peat-cutter says, we might not choose to start from here; but given it is Father’s day, if we were asked to give a Christian response, a good start might be in celebrating a quality like gentleness: indeed, elsewhere St Paul describes it as one of eight fruits of a good, spirit-transformed life. And when that fruit and any of the others are found in fathers, let us rejoice in it.