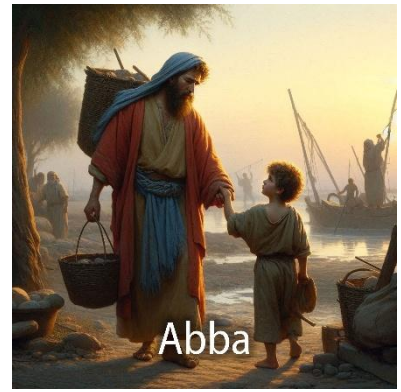


Abba

Hespeler, June 15, 2025 © Scott McAndless – Trinity Sunday
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31, Psalm 8, Romans 5:1-5, [John 16:12-15](#)

Jesus had a very particular way of talking about God. His favourite way to refer to God was to call God *Father*. He was hardly the first person to speak of God that way, but there was something special about the way he used the word. It was central to his teaching about God. Why else would he so specifically teach his disciples to pray saying, “Our Father,” you know, the one who “art in heaven”?

The word should not be taken literally. Like all language about God, it is a metaphor. Everybody understood that Jesus wasn’t literally saying that God was the biological father of every human being. Nor was he saying anything about God’s gender or genitalia. He was saying that the experience of God can be like the experience you might have with a human father.



Humanity of Jesus

Christian doctrine teaches many things about Jesus. One of the things that it teaches is that he was fully divine. It also teaches that he was fully human and leaves us to sort out the mystery of how both of those things could be true.

Father is an utterly human metaphor. Most every human being who has lived has had an experience of *father*. And yes, in some cases those may have been bad experiences or simply the experience of the absence of a father, but it is one common experience that we all share. The word means something to all of us.

Deeply Personal

But it is a deeply personal meaning. When I use the word father, it is associated all kinds of memories, emotions and experiences that I had of my own father. When *you* say it, it may be based on a whole different set of experiences. Since no human father is perfect, those experiences tend to be a mix of both positive and negative.

When I call God Father, I know that I have an image of God that has been affected by my experience of my father. And I do have an overall positive view of God, which I know has a lot to do with the fact that I had a good dad. In many ways, that experience has influenced my view of God more than any theological concepts or scriptural interpretations I may believe in.

Jesus Had a Father

And that made me think. If the metaphor of Father was so central to Jesus’ view of God, what were the very human experiences that gave meaning to that human metaphor for him? Jesus had a father. And I know that the nativity stories insist that Joseph wasn’t his biological father, but that doesn’t matter. Anyone who has had a beloved stepfather or someone else who has stepped into that key role in their life knows very well that biology is not always what makes someone a father.

And so, how could Jesus, fully human as he was, not give a thought to Joseph and what Joseph had done for him every time he spoke of God as Father? More than theology, Jesus’ thoughts about his heavenly Father had to be deeply connected to his human experience of Joseph.

And so, I was thinking. What was it about Joseph and his relationship to his extraordinary son that

contributed to Jesus' understanding of his God? What attributes of Joseph did Jesus associate with his God? And what was he trying to communicate to his followers with that word?

The Little We Know

We are told very little about Jesus' relationship with Joseph. In fact, Joseph is nowhere present in the gospels apart from the nativity stories. He is not even named in the Gospel of Mark.

Here is what we do know. We are told that Joseph was a carpenter, that he lived in Nazareth of Galilee, and that he had a heritage down in Bethlehem in Judea.

And we should probably not think of that word carpenter like we might think of a professional craftsman. If Joseph was a refugee from Judea living in a tiny place like Nazareth, he wouldn't have had a carpenter's shop. Chances are that he was working as a day labourer on construction sites and he probably had to travel to get that work. So, we really don't know much. But I think there is a story there.

First Memories

Jesus' very first memory of his father was him leaving. Joseph would go far away for work. He would often leave at first light on Sunday mornings and Jesus' mother would get him up and dressed so that he could say goodbye. He would always hold his father so tight, almost as if he was hoping that if he could hold him tight enough, he wouldn't have to go.

And when he was old enough, Jesus remembered putting his feelings into words and asking Joseph why he had to go. And Joseph got right down on his knees in front of his son and spoke to him as an equal.

"Your Abba has important work to do," he said.

"You mean," Jesus wanted to know, "you have to build important palaces and walls for the king in the big city?"

"Well, not really," Joseph smiled. "I mean, sure, I do get some work on some of the king's worksites, but his plans for his big, beautiful city are not what are important to me. I go because it is the only way that I know how to earn enough money to make sure that you and your mother and your little brothers and sisters have what you need to live. You are my important work."

A Greatly Anticipated Return

Joseph would go, often for four or five days at a time, and Jesus would wait impatiently for his return. As the days went by, he would stare more frequently towards the distant city, hoping to see Joseph trudging towards home.

When he would spy him coming, he would immediately drop whatever he was doing and run towards him shrieking with delight. He would never forget the smell of his weary father coming home – a mixture of sweat and sawdust and several layers of dirt and grime on his skin. It was the most beautiful smell in all the world.

And, though Joseph always came home exhausted, he would still take the time to sit with Jesus and tell him stories of everything that had happened while he was gone. Jesus would listen in rapt attention. From his childhood, he always loved stories.

Jesus Joins in the Work

As Jesus grew, the day came when he was finally old enough to join his father in the work. He was still young – no hair had yet sprouted on his chin – but he knew that anything he could do to contribute to the household would make a big difference for the growing family.

He had heard his father's stories so many times that nothing that happened on his first trip to the city really surprised him. But it was still quite different to experience it himself. They arrived early in the morning and went to the marketplace to sit and wait for someone to come and hire workers for the day.

They would come in dressed in their good robes – architects and master builders, masons and quartermasters – and they would call out how many people they were looking for to work on their sites for that day. The men would line up to be inspected with a critical eye.

At first, as you can imagine, they hesitated to hire Jesus. Too young, too small. Joseph had to insist at first that he would not go to any worksite without his son. And that usually persuaded them, for everyone knew that Joseph was a good worker.

Jesus spent many days working alongside his father. They were always golden days when he remembered them, even though the work was exhausting and the hours long. His father taught him everything from the use of simple tools to the most efficient ways of shifting heavy boulders and piles of wood.

When Work was Scarce

That was how their life went for years. Always on the move, going wherever the work was to be found. Sometimes, for several days at a time, there was no work to be had. Those were hard times and Jesus, a young and growing boy, might have grumbled at being hungry, but his father encouraged him, **“Ask, and it will be given to you;”** son, **“search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”** (Matthew 7:7)

And he meant it literally. They would pray and ask God for what they needed. They would also not hesitate to ask for hospitality or to knock on a door they were passing. Jesus was constantly amazed how kind and generous people could be, even when they did not have much themselves.

And, of course, Joseph also demonstrated an equal willingness to share. Whenever he had anything to spare, he would give to anyone who asked of him and do it joyfully. Of all the lessons that Jesus learned from his father, that was the one that drove deepest into his soul.

The Dynamic Changes

As time went by, the dynamic changed between the two of them. Jesus grew bigger and stronger and was more likely to be picked first when people were hiring. Meanwhile, Joseph grew slower. He was not old, at least not by our standards, but he had been wounded so many times in the work by falling stones and bad hammer blows that he bore many scars. The knuckles on his fingers had swollen and were slow to move and often caused him much pain.

But he was still a valued worker. His years of experience outweighed the limitations to his strength. The master masons who supervised the work never would have admitted it, but they often deferred to him when it came to judging whether a foundation was well laid or a structure stable enough. And so, Jesus continued to learn from his father about the importance of solid foundations and building well.

Work Shifts to Tiberias

As the years went by, King Herod Antipas stopped his building projects in Sepphoris to build a new city called Tiberias on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. That meant that the labourers who lived in Nazareth, much closer to Sepphoris, had to travel further and be away longer than ever.

Joseph and his son didn't have any choice – to Tiberias they went. Once they stayed there for ten straight days, pausing only from their work on the Sabbath. Towards the end, everyone had been working

so hard for so many days, that they were all getting reckless and cutting corners.

The Disaster

Joseph noticed the flaw in the wall before anyone else did. And when Jesus heard his warning, he knew well enough not to hesitate. He dropped his tools and stepped back immediately, calling on the others around him to do likewise.

One young man was new to the work. He did not recognize the urgency or the wisdom in the old man's voice. He continued with the task he had been given, fearful, perhaps, that he might not be paid for the day if he didn't finish it.

It had been many years since Jesus had seen his father move so fast. He grasped the straggler and, with a strength that he had almost forgotten he once had, he bodily flung the young man out of the danger zone.

Unfortunately, having accomplished such a thing, Joseph had no reserves of strength or speed left to get himself to safety.

A Father's Final Words

When they finally dug him out of the debris, Joseph was still breathing, but everyone understood that it would not be for long. As his son took his hand, Joseph used his final breaths to set Jesus on a course that would change history. He made him promise that he would not spend the rest of his life traveling from job to job, only to earn enough to get by.

"There is something special about you," he gasped between ragged breaths. "I have always known it. You have been sent to announce a different kind of kingdom than the one that Herod is trying to build up. You must turn your heart fully to that work now."

The Beginning

Jesus returned his father's body to Nazareth. There he mourned him together with his mother and his brothers. But once the time of mourning was over, he headed out to the far side of the Jordan where he had heard a man named John was baptizing people.

But he never forgot his father. When, sometime later, he heard of a tower that collapsed in Siloam, killing eighteen, ([Luke 13:4-5](#)) he remembered holding his dying father in his arms as if it had only just happened. Surely when he taught his followers that you should never blame the victims of such disasters for what happened to them – that they were no more worthy of destruction than anyone else – a few tears must have formed in his eyes.

A Loaded Term

When Jesus taught us to pray and say "Father," he knew he was using a loaded term – that it came with all of the baggage that came with the role and expectations that were put upon a father in early first century Galilee. But surely it also carried a lot of personal baggage and many happy memories of a man who had played a role in making Jesus the man he became, at least in human terms.

I am very thankful for the positive view of God that I gained from my dealings with my father. I am sure that Jesus, whose essential humanity is central to Christian doctrine, would have said the same.

I know that word "father" is an emotionally loaded term for each one of us. I would encourage all of you to consider all of the ways in which all of that emotional baggage – good, bad or indifferent – has influenced your idea of God. But do not forget, our human experience of human fathers can never define or limit who God is.