

When I was a little boy, my parents finally bought a stereogram, and we were able for the first time to enjoy the luxury of listening to records. One of the first my mother bought was the soundtrack of the musical *Carousel*. I am sure the older folk here recall it. I didn't really understand the storyline at the time, but I remember my mother singing along with the choruses. (At least the words were in English, so I could understand them – unlike when my mother sang along with Puccini's *Tosca* in Italian. She didn't understand the words either, by the way.) I remember, though, one line in *Carousel* which really used to annoy me. Billy Bigelow has just found out that his wife is pregnant, and sings about all the fun he will have with his little boy, "My boy Bill" as he plans to call him. Suddenly he stops, and asks, "What if he ... is a girl?" Then comes the line which so annoyed me as a child: "You can have fun with a son, but you gotta be a father to a girl."

I was annoyed not because my father was lacking – on the contrary, I could not have had a more devoted father – but just at the principle of the thing. Even as a child, it was clear to me: a boy needs fathering every bit as much as a girl.

Ever since the industrial revolution, there has been a problem with fathering in the West, it seems. Work took men out of the home, and so far away from the home, that they often had little time to be with their children. It wasn't their fault: it was just a necessity of life. But it meant that the skills of fathering were not so easily passed down from father to son.

Psychologists tell us that girls will often look instinctively for men who have the same patterns of behaviour as their dad; their fathers give them the first idea of what to expect from men. Therefore, if father was kind, loving, and gentle, they will look for those characteristics in the men they encounter. And boys will tend to model themselves on their father: that is how we human beings work, we are social animals and we learn behaviour by modelling.

Of course, we also have free will, and sometimes a girl makes a determined decision to choose a man different to her father, or a boy decides to behave differently to his father – both my brother and I hated our father's addiction to smoking, for example, and neither of us have ever smoked – but we must admit, I think, that we are generally more like our parents than unlike them

Sometimes separation from a father cannot be helped. Even when fathers are physically removed from their families, though, there are ways for them to nurture healthy relationships with their children. For instance, a woman named Angela Patton started a program in the United States, where teen-aged girls went to visit their fathers in prison for a father-daughter dance. It was a successful programme that has spread across the country and helped not only daughters find connection, love,

and support from fathers, but also for fathers to feel important in the lives of their daughters.

Boys who have a good relationship with their fathers are usually happier at school, and were even shown in one study to do better in maths!

For the Church, St Joseph is of course the model of fatherhood: and note, he was a foster-father, but no less loving for that. It is surely a reflection on the closeness and respect which Jesus had for his foster-father that he chooses the word *abba*, the word he would have used as a child for Joseph, as the word which he consistently uses for his father in heaven, and which he teaches us to use in prayer.

Amongst the social changes of the last fifty years there have been many which have been harmful to families, as we have seen the number of people committing to marriage drop, and the number of marriage breakups dramatically increase.

Nevertheless, there has been a real move by many fathers to spend more time with their children, to see their role as much more than just the bread-winner – and insofar as that has led to them being more engaged with their sons and daughters, that, at least, is one thing to be thankful for. When I go out walking for the one hour of exercise that we are allowed each day, I see lots of men pushing a stroller, often accompanied by their wives, and lots of others kicking a football with the children on Highfield and Lynden parks – so there is something good that has come out of the lockdown for some families at least. Dads are working in the home more than they have since the Industrial revolution!

I know I have so much to be thankful for in my father. Yes, he was the bread-winner. He was a firm but gentle disciplinarian. We learnt, my brother and I, how to relate with love and respect towards women from the way he treated our mother. He was really more practical than mum. He taught me to read and write before I went to school; he taught me to cook – that just wasn’t mum’s thing, really – to sew a button on my shirt, how to tie my laces, how to retrieve my pyjama cord when the end of it had disappeared into the pyjama (!), how to garden, how to lay concrete, how to change a washer on a tap – in fact, just about everything practical except how to drive. He just didn’t have the patience for that. And of course, together with my mother, he taught me to pray.

Today, let us remember our fathers with gratitude. Let us pray for good fathers for the children of our nation. And those of you who are fathers: be aware of your importance and your responsibility. To correct Rodgers and Hammerstein, Yes, you can have fun with a son – but you gotta be a father to any child, boy or girl.