
A Child of God

How great is the love the father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! (1 Peter 3:1 NIV)

SHUDDERS RACKED THE CHILD'S BODY AS THE ICY COLD bit through her dressing gown. As she perched on the stairs in the dark, it was hard to tell how much of the shivering was caused by the temperature and how much by the deep, gnawing fear that had become such a part of her.

The moonlight gleamed palely through the landing window, which was rimed with Jack Frost's tracings. Breath fogged in the chilly air and was held. Every fibre strained to hear the slightest sound—anything to indicate that the others were still there in the room below. Not a sound. The child struggled to decide whether it was worth the reprimands that would follow to go down and open the door on some pretext or other. No, better to edge nearer the door, trying with each cautious step to avoid the creaking treads, so familiar now from long practice.

Desperation for reassurance that they were indeed still there overcame fear. A cautious step down onto the next stair, a pause to listen, then another step. Was that a sound from underneath?

Suddenly, in a heartbeat, the surrounding air changed from ice cold to an all-pervading warmth. And with it a voice—gentle, loving, and achingly familiar—yet somehow unknown.

‘Don’t be afraid, my little one. All is well. You will not be abandoned. You are truly loved, both by them and by me. Go to bed and sleep. You will not be forsaken, and I will always be with you.’

Filled with peace and the comfort of that promise, the child returned to bed and slept. Never again was she to wake terrified that she had been abandoned.

That child was me. Even now, over sixty-five years later, that memory is as fresh and powerful as it was then. In those days, God was still portrayed as more of an authoritarian figure than as the ‘Abba’ to whom Jesus referred. The revelation of his love and care has formed me, and filled me with a deep desire to help others to know the depth of God’s love for them.

When I was four years old, my father left my mother, me, and my two younger brothers and returned to his family home on the other side of the village where I grew up. A few months later, he collected me from my mother and took me to live with him, his mother, and

two sisters. To my five-year-old self, it felt as though my mother had now rejected me.

Less than a year later, my father left for work one day and didn't return. I still remember that day, for he left the house without kissing me goodbye. An unreasoning fear consumed me as I ran after him down the steps, calling to him. Was it a premonition? When he didn't return, there was great consternation, whispered conversations, and no answers to my questions. 'Where's my daddy? Why hasn't he come home? When will he be back?'

It took my grandmother eighteen months and the services of a private detective to find him—though long before then, it must have been clear what had happened. It isn't easy to keep secrets in a small village. He had simply walked away from us all in order to be with another man's wife. Apparently, she was the cause of his original defection. They had gone to London and remained there for the rest of my father's life. It was nearly three years before I saw him again.

So by the time God gave me that wonderful assurance, I had a deep-seated fear and expectation of abandonment by those I loved and trusted. When first taken from my mother, I had been told—and this continued to be the case as I grew—that my father had been informed that she was ill-treating and neglecting me. To this was later added the information that my mother hadn't the finances to look after both me and my two brothers.

(Small wonder, since my father frequently defaulted on the maintenance payments awarded by the court!) So in my mind it was clear that I was not as important as my brothers.

These half-truths and lies, along with many others, meant that I grew up to despise and reject my mother. Many years passed before that rift was healed and our relationship restored. It says much for my mother's love and patience that she welcomed me so wholeheartedly when I finally recognised the truth and sought to make amends.

In the months following my father's departure, the constant, nagging fear of being abandoned by those I loved and trusted led me time and again to leave my bed to listen for any sounds from the living room below in order to reassure myself that my remaining family was still there. Strange how such deeply damaging events can remain so clear in our memories long after their effects have been healed.

In those pre-TV days, when more often than not my grandmother and aunts would be reading, there were few sounds to reassure me. Leaving my bed and disturbing them with whatever excuse I could manufacture always got me into trouble. Yet the fear of being abandoned frequently outweighed the fear of retribution.

After that encounter with God, our loving Heavenly Father became very real to me and was, in truth, the father I longed for. God became the presence who loved

and cared for me and who, unlike my biological father, would never abandon me, becoming the one on whom I could safely rely. It was to be many years before I felt able to fully trust and rely upon another human being—that person being John, my husband of fifty-one years.

Despite the years of theological study that taught my mind to comprehend that God is neither male nor female and should not be limited by our understanding of gender, and despite all that I do and have done in bringing about justice and equality for women and girls in very many areas of life, in my heart God is still and always will be Abba, Daddy.

I took all my troubles, woes, and hopes to him, knowing he would listen. Sometimes, however, answered prayer had a sting in the tail. As my eleventh birthday approached, so did the eleven-plus, the exam that determined who would attend grammar school. I was able enough but poor at focusing on my work. My mind was often a jumble of confused thoughts and anxieties. A teacher's nightmare, I squandered my abilities and underachieved in almost all areas except reading.

I had ambition, though: I wanted to pass the eleven-plus and go to grammar school. My grandmother had always stressed the importance of obtaining the best education possible. She wanted me to be independent and able to live my life without relying on a man to provide for me. As I grew up, this became a central ambition for me.

I was determined never to be left in the difficulties in which my mother had found herself.

But there was another, less edifying reason for my ambition. I had overheard my father comment rather disparagingly that I wasn't grammar school material, and I'd be sure to fail the exam. How I wanted to prove him wrong. Maybe if I did, he'd love me and spend more time with me. Forlorn hope!

I prayed, pleading with God to help me to pass the exam and promising heaven knows what if he answered my pleas. I tried to focus more on my studies and prepare for the exam. My stomach was in a permanent knot of anxiety as the exam day approached. On that fateful, and for many life-changing, day we found ourselves sitting in the classroom, desks spaced to make it difficult to cheat. In an absolute silence broken only by a muffled sob from one for whom it was just all too much, we sweated over the papers before us. The time passed in a blur as I desperately tried to answer the questions in front of me to the very best of my ability.

The joy of receiving the news that I had passed was somewhat overshadowed by the discovery that I, one of the less promising pupils, had achieved the highest marks. How could this be? The head clearly suspected mischief and checked to see who my nearest neighbours had been. Fortunately for me, all those near me had failed the exam quite comprehensively. Otherwise, I would have been denounced as a cheat, which I most certainly