

Today is the Feast of St. Swithun, 15th July. Folklore says that if it rains today, it will rain for 40 days.

St Swithun's day if thou dost rain
For forty days it will remain
St Swithun's day if thou be fair
For forty days 'twill rain nae mare

A Buckinghamshire variation has

If on St Swithun's day it really pours
You're better off to stay indoors.

So far there seems no hope of it becoming true for rain this year; obviously you have not been praying hard enough! But that has got nothing to do with my sermon; I just thought you would like to know!!

There is an advertisement in Steyne Gardens for a concert next Saturday saying that topping the bill is 'Abba Revival', voted UK number one tribute act. **ABBA** the Swedish pop group was formed in Stockholm in 1972. The group's name derives from the first letter in each of the first names of its four members. But this led me think of the biblical use of the Aramaic term 'Abba'.

In the verse before our New Testament reading (Ephesians 1.2) St Paul says: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father"; and in the next verse he says: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ". But in his Letter to the Galatians (1.7) it is written: "God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of his Son, crying 'Abba! Father!'". Abba, the Aramaic word for Father, occurs three times for God in the New Testament; once from the lips of Jesus himself in the Garden of Gethsemane shortly before his death, saying (Mark 14:36): "*Abba*, Father, all things are possible to you; remove this cup from me. Yet not what I want, but what you want." St Paul uses it twice, once in Galatians, as I have just quoted, and also in his Letter to the Romans (8:15) saying: "When we cry 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God". It seems evident from these texts that, in apostolic times, the Christians made use of the term '*Abba*' in their prayers to God. Scholars believe that this word Abba was a more personal form of address than the conventional Father though Abba would seem to be simultaneously an intimate term and a term of great respect. Perhaps "Dear Father" showing the intense nature of both the intimate and respectful aspects of the word would be the most appropriate translation rather than in our own word Daddy. It is interesting that this 'A' sound appears in the affectionate word for Father in a many languages. To name a few: French Papa, German Vater, Latin Pater, and Malay Bappa. One of the first words many English children say is Dadda. (Recently I even heard the variation Grand-dadda!) Of course the same applies to Mumma! They all have the same, sooft sound; the sound that one associates with terms of endearment, and affection, and trust. This puts the Father-ship of God in the right relationship with ourselves, especially when Paul refers to us as the 'children of God'.

Unfortunately some people tend to over-emphasize the Victorian Fatherhood of God; as a stern and forbidding character. In spite of appearances, I am not old enough to remember Victorian fathers, but I cannot believe that they were all the fearsome creatures we are led to think. Many must have been just as gentle and affectionate as present-day parents - otherwise they would not have produced such nice grand-children as we have here in church today! These phrases such as 'father' and 'children of God', conjure up the right mental picture to remind us that we are members of one big Christian family. As in all families, we have our 'off' days when we squabble and moan about each other. Also as in all families, we have our 'on' days, when we are all smiles and good cheer - such as at our Sunday services - at least sometimes! As a family, we grow together sharing in each other's sorrows and joys.

Abba meaning "Father" was also used as a title or honorific for religious scholars or leaders in Jesus' times, and some people use it today. But in this context Jesus says in St Matthew's Gospel 23.9: "Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven"; and that is the reason why I do not like being called Father - except by my two children who prefer to call me 'Dad'.

In our readings St Paul tells us that we are also heirs of God; heirs to all the wealth of God; every sort of good gift under the sun. But, like normal heirs, we should expect to go through some period of probation before expectation. A normal father expects his heir to prove himself worthy of his inheritance. As fellow heirs with Jesus Christ, we must help to share with him in his work on earth. Helping our fellow men and women, and bringing them to a realisation of God. This is a true spirit of involvement. But what a splendid involvement it is! What a joyful involvement it is; one which we can enter into with pleasurable hope and expectation. How different from the selfish and miserable existence of those who are heirs and debtors to the flesh: who have nothing permanent to show for their life at the end of the day. Gone are the days when Christianity was a symbol of sober, doleful misery. At least, it should be gone!

When I published a picture of a laughing Jesus on the Magazine cover in my last parish, a non-church-goer complained that it was blasphemous and cancelled his subscription, for he hated the idea of a God who laughs. (Here it is.) But if God really does want to share in our joys and pleasures he must laugh. If he doesn't, he is not the God for me. Anyway, he needs a sense of humour to put up with some of our Misery Martins. At any school sports day, spectators will happily applaud every child who wins, but there is never any doubt when your own child, or one of whom you are fond, wins. Then everyone around you hears the increase in your excitement and applause. Likewise with God; He is pleased with everyone's efforts, but he must surely be doubly pleased with the efforts of those who truly think of him as Father.

So let us pray for a return to the early days of Christianity when, in spite of the trials and tribulations of the world, the coming together of Christians was an event of joy and love, and

happiness - shared with one another in the true spirit of the children of Abba, “Our Father in Heaven”.

