

Views from the Pews - Abba, Father

'Abba' is an Aramaic word usually translated as a term of intimate connection between father and child, equivalent to our 'Daddy'. It's true that 'Abba' was a word used by children to address their father within the family home. Jesus used it to express his familiar, confident prayers to the Father, and he taught us to use it, too. But in Biblical terms, it also has another and deeply underestimated meaning, completely missed by the simple child-friendly image, and offensive to those who never knew real paternal affection.

In theological understanding, the word 'Abba' carries another implication, on a level built on but well above personal affection and with much more important and potentially challenging consequences. Yes, it means 'Daddy, I love you'. But it also means 'Father, I will obey you'. So that one word expresses not only intimacy, but also obedience. It's that second meaning that gets glossed over by casual readers. The word 'Abba' for Jesus included recognising an authority that commands obedience. The loving connection was not only important in itself, but also as the context for his costly submission to the Father's will.

In Gethsemane, Jesus addresses God in both Aramaic heart language (*Abba*) and in Greek sonship language (*Pater*), to emphasise their slightly different meanings.

Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 'Abba, Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will'" (Mark 14:35–36).

Likewise, Paul assures the Romans that their status as children of God includes both intimacy and willing obedience:

...you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father' (Rom. 8:15).

So the word 'Abba' has a far richer and deeper meaning than the child-like affection carried by the word 'Daddy'. We benefit in our relationship with God as we grow in faith sufficient to see the fuller implications of a mature understanding of 'Abba'. The Aramaic word has been preserved for centuries in virtually every translation because it leads us to recognise our duty of recognising God's authority in our lives. Jesus showed us how intimacy brings obedience, and obedience brings intimacy. They grow together because they feed each other.

Kim King