

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

11 May 2025

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by the Revd Canon Matthew Vernon

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On Thursday, as part of the VE Day commemorations, there was an interview with a German man, Nicholas Frank. Nicholas Frank's father was Governor General of Poland during the Second World War. Appointed by Hitler, Hans Frank was responsible for the deaths of 4 million people in Poland. He was found guilty at the Nuremberg trials and hanged. His son Nicholas was 7 years old at the time. He is under no illusions about his father's role in the Nazi crimes. And he carries a photo of his father's body, so he knows that his father is well and truly dead.

I wonder what Nicholas feels when we talk about God as our Father.

Talk of God as Father is complicated. Complicated for people with complicated paternal relationships. Complicated too for those of us with great Dads, but who know that God is not really like an earthly father - not some idealised, perfect father figure. I'm grateful beyond words and privileged to have a healthy relationship with my Dad. Having the same sense of humour and faith is part of that. But as I learn more about God, I realise that God is beyond any human describing. Calling God "Father" feels inadequate somehow, or not the whole picture.

"Abba, Father" is at the heart of Jesus' teaching. In this morning's Gospel reading, the Gospel of John has Jesus saying "The Father and I are one". This is the same Gospel that describes Jesus as the Word at the beginning of creation, Jesus the light of the world, life itself. The same Gospel that invites us to respond with our hearts and lives, rather than respond with some narrow, literal interpretation.

God being beyond words has always been part of Christian understanding. "He hath no virtue, nor is He virtue, nor light, nor does He live, nor is He life, nor is He substance, nor age, nor time, nor is there any understandable touching of Him ... nor is He spirit as we understand spirit, nor sonhead, nor fatherhead, nor any other thing known by us, nor of any that has been, nor is there any way by reason or understanding to come onto Him." That's just one example, from the 6th Century, from Dionysius the Areopagite. <sup>1</sup> There are many more. God is beyond our understanding. We struggle with our human language.

A more recent example helps explore this further. My friend Will is one of the clergy in Hong Kong. We were colleagues when I worked there. Will's Mum is called Mary, she died in Monmouth last year aged 95. Her autobiography was called "How Not To Boil An Egg". Mary was born 1929 and grew up in India with servants. Aged 8, she sent to a small boarding school in north Wales, but in 1939, with the outbreak of the war, the Government sent 2000 children back to India. After the war, Mary was a young, new teacher in Kent. In the years of rationing, the duty teacher was given an egg as a bonus. In those days this was a taste of paradise. <sup>2</sup> Except Mary had never cooked a thing in her life. So when the egg started bouncing around in boiling water, Mary thought it would explode and she took it out very underdone: "How Not To Boil An Egg".

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<sup>1</sup> Attributed to Dionysius's *Hid Divinity* in "I, Julian" by Claire Gilbert p.98

<sup>2</sup> With thanks to Phoebe, Vali and Issy

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Mary was Christian all her life. She returned to India in the 1960s when her husband was the headteacher of a mission school. They became great friends with a Hindu family and Mary kept visiting India throughout her life, staying in an ashram. My friend Will says in her final years Mary talked a lot about the unity of God. She wrote about our unity with God, going as far as writing “I am God”. Will was shocked when he first read that. To claim “I am God” literally is misguided. But Will knew his mother was a person of deep faith, and fuelled by his deep respect for her, Will continues to reflect on what she might have meant.

Recently we noticed how Richard Rohr, priest and promoter of mysticism helps us what Mary might have meant. “God is both intimate and ultimate, no longer “out there,” though not just “in here,” either. When we know that we are living tabernacles of the Great Transcendence, the gap is forever overcome in our very existence. We gain a tremendous respect for ourselves (and others), while also knowing this is a totally free gift from God. This may be experienced as deep peace and contentment, an ultimate sense of being at home.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus said “The Father and I are one”. Jesus knows the Father “in utter wisdom and love; with joy and delight ... in union of mutual indwelling; and through perfect obedience”. And we are invited, in the Gospel of John, to grow in closeness, “into fuller obedience to the command of love, into ever-deeper mutual indwelling and joy”.<sup>4</sup> As David Ford puts it.

This is the foundation for a way of living very different to the self-centred, convenient, transactional, materialist culture that dominates our lives. “When we know that we are living tabernacles of the Great Transcendence, the gap is forever overcome in our very existence. We gain a tremendous respect for ourselves (and others), while also knowing this is a totally free gift from God.”

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Richard Rohr in “Just This”, p 64

<sup>4</sup> David Ford, The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary p. 209-210