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## BEING MEN

As the annual extravaganza of fellowship and fundraising that is our Bazaar approaches, I am reminded of the immense contribution made by the women of St. John's (both individually and collectively) to this parish. We should be impoverished without the formidable energies and skills offered to the service of the Lord and his church by the Episcopal Church Women and the Chancel Society, the Business Women, the women's study groups, and also the individual women who serve in the vestry, the choir, the Sunday School, the office staff, and so on. Such abundance of good works offered to Christ is wonderful. Yet it is not only in churchly good works, nor only as wives and mothers, nor only in all sorts of other occupations and vocations in the world, but most of all, as persons of Christian faith and prayer, that women make a vital contribution to the wellbeing of the church.

It would, however, be a mistake of great proportions, to assume that the work of the church, and the work of religion, can be left to women alone. It is a false division of labor, though not unknown. As in family life, the responsible involvement of men in the life and leadership of the church is critical; and the consequences are dire – for men, women, and children - when men lose or abandon this responsible involvement in leadership. There is a depressingly great amount of sociological evidence for such consequences in the families of uninvolved fathers: similar consequences surely follow for churches without men. I am not just talking about men to keep the roof from leaking (important as that is). What is critical to the health of the church is men who believe, who pray, and who take responsibility (each in his own proper degree) for the spiritual welfare of their churches and families.

The reason for the active leadership of men in the church is fundamentally theological. It is in obedience to the revelation given us of the divine Father in the divine Son and by their divine Spirit, that all human beings, male and female, learn what it means to be human; it is also where men learn what it means to be men. Fatherhood, divine or human, does not receive very good press nowadays: it is telling that the words "patriarchal" and "paternalistic" are now used almost exclusively in a pejorative sense. It is conventional to argue that if "God is male, then male is god", that masculine language for God privileges males to the detriment of females, and licenses the abuse of power by males. What this argument overlooks is that the Christian religion arose out of a radical critique of predatory, tyrannical, arbitrary, abusive "male gods" – Baal, Marduk, and Zeus. Christianity

inherits the devastating criticism of pagan myths made by the prophets of Israel and by the Greek philosophers. It is axiomatic for Christ-ianity that God is not "male" – he cannot be a sexual being - and cannot behave as "male gods" of the pagan myths do, nor justify such behavior in men. The fatherhood of God, spoken of by the prophets, is almighty, but not arbitrary: his power is always exercised in accord with the reason that is his eternal Word, and in accord with the love that is his Spirit. His "jealousy" is an uncom-promising zeal for the eternal good of his beloved, and he is fearsome only to those who mean evil, while he is tender in his mercy to those who trust in him. "He is a father to the fatherless" says the psalmist, "and defendeth the cause of the widow".

In the unique divine sonship incarnate in Jesus Christ there is an "express image" (Heb.1.3) of divine fatherhood, an image that does not fall short in any way of the goodness it represents. (As God, and only as God, can the Son reveal the Father: anything less than God or other than God could not be the revelation of God: "through God alone can God be known.") Christ speaks and acts in the gospels with the authority and power that belongs to God alone, proclaiming his kingdom, calling disciples, casting out demons, healing the sick, cleansing the leper, forgiving sins (Mark 1.14-2.12), but it is a power that is never arbitrary, tyrannical, self-aggrandizing. He acts always in the service of the eternal purpose of God and the eternal good of his faithful people. For Paul, Christ's self-giving love for the Church is the model for husbands in their care for their wives (Ephes. 5.25-33). The arts of husbandry apply not only to the family, but also to men in the church and congregation. Our Saint John says: "I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one." (1 John 1.12-14). The Venerable Bede's explanation of this is one men can take to heart: "Remember that you are fathers, says John. If you forget him who is from the beginning, you will lose that status. Never forget that you are still young men, which means that you must go on fighting until you win the battle and receive the crown of victory. Be humble [like children], so not as to be killed in battle".

**The Rev. Gavin G. Dunbar**

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