

Sermon of Pastor Gareth Leyshon at St Dyfrig's, Treforest

31st Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year A – 29/30 October 2011

Friends in St Dyfrig's - I've got a problem.

"You must call no one on earth your father," said Jesus, "since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven."

Yet here I am, a Catholic priest, in a role which means that people call me 'Father', and if I wish to address colleagues respectfully, I would be expected to call them, 'Father'.

For many years, I have struggled with this particular passage of the Bible. Is there a way of reconciling our current practice within the Church, with what Jesus says?

Is Jesus saying "Never use the word 'Father', except for God?" No. You don't have to stop calling your dad, 'father'. This Gospel passage is all about honours given to spiritual leaders, not about everyday family relationships.

Most of the Catholic writers who try to explain why it's OK to call priests 'father' point out that the role of a priest is fatherly, and so using the title is good because it actually honours God-the-Father.

But there are two problems with this.

First, the priest stands in the place of Jesus, not God the Father. The priest directly represents Jesus, your eldest brother in faith. He only reflects God the Father because Jesus himself is the living image of His Heavenly Father.

Second, we're using a title that Jesus explicitly asked us not to use.

"But Jesus was only using exaggeration to make a point," some would say.

With due respect, I disagree. The title 'Father' was sacred to Jesus. He taught his disciples to pray 'Our Father'. He said that if we did the Father's will, we would be counted as brother, as sister, even as mother to himself – but not as father. Jesus came so that we could know that God was our loving Father in heaven, who longs to have a deep relationship with us.

And because I am a follower of Jesus, I must do my best to obey his instructions.

The sharp-eyed among you will have noticed that for the last six months or so, I have been avoiding a certain word. In the newsletter, you will have seen "Revd Gareth" in place of "Fr Gareth" – or clumsy forms of words which avoid my name altogether. On the parish answerphone, it invites you to leave a message for "Gareth Leyshon, the pastor". After much thought and prayer, and consultation with my spiritual director, I reached a decision in conscience in the spring of this year, that I could not use the title 'Father' as a religious form of address without disobeying a direct instruction from Jesus.

That's not an easy decision for any Catholic to make – and especially difficult for someone who wears a collar and networks with other priests all the time. Nevertheless, it is a matter of principle. In the news this week, we have already seen the Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral resign because he put the principle of 'right to protest' ahead of the very negative practical consequences for the Cathedral. Principles are only of value when we follow them, even when they lead us through challenging consequences indeed.

The rest of today's Gospel message is about titles in general, and a warning to leaders in the Christian community not to take on titles of superiority – teacher, master, or rabbi. And yet, human courtesy requires that we use some kind of title in certain circumstances. There would be times where it would be downright rude to introduce myself as just 'Gareth', or where a name alone would not create the appropriate professional boundaries needed for a pastoral conversation.

Religious orders have struggled with this issue, too. Among Franciscans, who take seriously the call to Christian humility, it is common for what would elsewhere be called a 'superior' to be termed a 'guardian' or 'servant'. In the USA, it is common for a parish priest to be called 'pastor'. And of all the titles available, I think pastor has the least sense of superior authority. Therefore, when it is socially necessary for me to use a title, from now on, it will be 'pastor'.

This is a personal decision of conscience. The Gospel says 'call no one on earth your father'. And in the light of today's Gospel reading, I felt it was right to give you an explanation of my recent behaviour. The Gospel often challenges us out of the comfortable traditions we are resting in. I can only be a preacher of the Gospel if I live out the whole Gospel, without avoiding the challenging parts. Therefore, for myself, I will not use the title – not of other priests, nor in referring to myself. Yet I have not edited it out of scripts that others write, for the newsletter or the notices. And there may be times where, despite my intent not to do so, I use it because I can find no other polite option in real time, when in the middle of a conversation, especially with another priest.

If you agree with my reasoning, you are very welcome to refer to me as Pastor Gareth, but I will not rebuke anyone who continues to call me Father Gareth. For me, it is a challenge to be faithful to the teaching of Jesus, however socially awkward the implications are.

I don't doubt that news of my decision will travel on the grapevine, and soon, someone might ask you, is it true that your parish priest thinks that priests shouldn't be called 'Father'? When you confirm the news they will ask why, so have an answer ready to give them! The answer you can give is this: **Our priest does not represent God-the-Father. Our priest represents Jesus, who came so that everyone should know we have only one Father, and he is in heaven. Our priest is obeying the command of Jesus, so we can be sure that we have one Father – the God who made us and who loves us very much.**