

2nd before Lent 2009

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God

All species, humans included, are designed so that there is the maximum chance of reproduction. The urge to reproduce is strong, and that is why it is so devastating when a longed-for child does not happen and why people will go to extreme lengths to have a child.

For anyone who has been in this situation, you will know that it seems that everyone is pregnant, and it seems so unfair that some people are so careless about having children and how they treat them.

One of the best decisions Mark and I ever made was to adopt and we now have three fantastic children.

It has, however, led to some surprising situations. People assume that your children will inherit your characteristics.

My oldest child had blond ringlets when she was little and frankly looked nothing like me at all. If you have a small child in a push chair, complete strangers will talk to you.

An elderly lady approached, and said;

‘ooh, isn’t she blond. Is her father blond?’

Without thinking I replied

‘I don’t know, I never saw him.’

Before I could go on she reacted

‘well really’ and stalked off.

This question of inheritance has always interested me. The nature versus nurture question is of particular relevance with adopted children. I notice that my children pronounce some words in the same manner as me, they have acquired certain characteristics.

When a child is conceived, it receives half its chromosomes from its father and half from its mother. Siblings, except in the case of identical twins, do not have identical genetic make up. The knowledge that we now have about DNA and how genetic sequences are recombined during reproduction enables us to understand the mechanism by which characteristics are passed from one generation to another, something that the Augustinian monk Mendel observed in his brilliant pea plant experiments 200 years ago without having any understanding of the cellular processes involved. This work wasn’t given any credit until early in the 20th century. In this year when we celebrate the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin’s birth, the process of natural selection as a driver for evolution is generally accepted, except by a few religious fundamentalists, but the work of one of Darwin’s predecessors, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, is often ignored, even though Darwin himself wrote of him: *Lamarck did the eminent service of arousing attention to the probability of all changes in the organic, as well as in the inorganic world, being the result of law, and not of miraculous interposition.* Lamarck, like Darwin believed that the world was very old, but unlike Darwin, he proposed that acquired characteristics could be inherited. The example always cited when I was at school was that of a blacksmith – because he would have muscled arms so would his sons. When I later studied genetics at university, it was the accepted wisdom that all inheritance could be explained by

the genetic sequence, and the whole idea of Lamarckian inheritance was considered laughable. All could be explained by Mendelian inheritance and Darwinian evolution.

It is fascinating that recent research has shown that this is not the case. Scientists at Tufts University school of medicine have demonstrated that epigenetic changes, that is changes that do not change the DNA itself but which alter the way in which that DNA is expressed, can be passed on to future generations. The study showed that rats raised by stressed mothers that had physically neglected or abused their offspring showed epigenetic changes, so that their offspring were more likely to neglect or harm the next generation. Similarly, rats given stimuli to improve their cognitive function, passed on this characteristic to the next generation.

The nature versus nurture argument is relevant not just for the present, but for future generations.

You may be wondering where on earth all this is leading.

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.

St Paul, in Romans Chapter 8, talks about us becoming children by adoption, heirs through grace, of the kingdom of God.

For St Paul, it is the inheritance of the kingdom that is at issue. To be adopted is to have all the rights of the natural child. But what about the characteristics of the child?

The book of Genesis tells us that we are made in the image of God. Yet, no-one would look at any one of us and be able to say, 'ah, now I know what God is like'.

In this I don't just mean our physical appearance, but our character too. We tell untruths, we are lazy, we are selfish, we get jealous, we are capable of sulking – not all of these all the time, but sometimes. That does not fit with our image of God. God's above all that.

What we know of Jesus does fit. He is selfless, he is good, he can withstand temptation, he cares for people no-one else even notices, he is prepared to make a stand against what is evil, he is prepared to die for others.

Jesus is in the image of God. St John takes this as far as one can by saying that in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God.

If then we follow the example of Christ, imitate him as far as we are able, we will become more like him and therefore more in the image of God.

Adopted children pass on their rights of inheritance to their children. My children are Bides. They and their children should they have them, will always be a part of this family. But it is not just property that they will inherit.

In addition to their DNA, they will inherit epigenetic changes that will affect the way in which their genes are expressed, and those changes can be passed on to their children.

If we become more Christ-like, our children will be more Christ-like. How we behave influences the future in more ways than we had previously realised.

St John says that Christ gives to those that believe power to become children of God. St Paul talks about us becoming heirs and inheriting the kingdom.

Our old testament reading talks about wisdom, the first of God's acts,
when I (wisdom) was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.

Wisdom is not to be confused with knowledge, all knowledge can be used wisely or foolishly, or even destructively.

We have been given much knowledge about how our bodies work, and how we pass on our characteristics to our offspring.

We have been given knowledge about Christ, enough to show us what it might mean if our prayer 'your kingdom come, your will be done', was answered.

Put those two pieces of knowledge together, and we can see how it is up to us to be part of the answer to that prayer. If we are wise enough to do everything we can to imitate Christ, then generation by generation we can move ever closer to God's will being done, his kingdom coming.

Christ has given us the power to become God's children. All we have to do is become more like him.

Amen.