

Trinity College Cambridge
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FROM (BEFORE THE) CRADLE TO (AFTER THE) GRAVE
Conceiving

Psalm 127 Mark 3: 31–35

Michael Banner

How should we live our lives from ‘cradle to grave’? – from before the cradle to after the grave – if we are to encompass the scope of Christian thought and reflection on this matter, and the theme of our sermons this term. So let me start at the beginning – before the cradle.

Were this the sort of family service where youngsters are encouraged to shout out answers to questions along the way, I would not risk asking the question with which I begin – which is, ‘How do we conceive children?’ In a setting less intellectual than Trinity Chapel, there would be a risk of receiving answers of a possibly somewhat vulgar or crude kind – here, of course, I can take it for granted that you will guess that my question is intended not to illicit an account of the mechanics of conception, so to say, but to invite reflection on how we think of children, how we imagine or envision them. My question is not about how we get children, but what we take ourselves to be getting when we do. How do we conceive the children we conceive?

Since the birth more than 35 years ago, of Louise Brown, the first test tube baby, a major site of our thinking about children has been in our thinking about childlessness and how to relieve it. In other words, what we have said and thought about childlessness has proved to be one of most influential ways in which we have implicitly articulated our conception of children. So, what have we said and thought about childlessness?

Some years after the birth of Louise Brown, Sarah Franklin, now a professor in this university, wrote up a study of representations of childless couples in the media – and she begins her account of her findings with a striking recitation of headlines from newspapers: ‘New Hope for the Childless, Comfort for the Childless, Joy For Baby Hope Couples, Childless Couples Given Hope, Infertile Couples Get Hope From New Method, Mother’s Joy Over 1000th Test-Tube Baby, Test-Tube Boy for Thrilled Parents, Test Tube Triplets a City First for “Ecstatic” Parents’ –and so on.¹ As Franklin sees it, the stories behind these very familiar sounding headlines are typically constructed as stories of hopelessness and happiness – would-be parents overcome the desperation and grief of infertility and find joy in obtaining what these wondrous technologies promise them, that object of their supposed longing: a child of one’s own.

¹ S. Franklin, ‘Deconstructing “Desperateness”: The Social Construction of Infertility in Popular Representations of New Reproductive Technologies’, in *The New Reproductive Technologies*, ed. M. McNeil, I. Varcoe and S. Yearley (London, 1990), 200.

Christianity, I want to suggest to you, finds itself doubly at odds with this way of thinking about childlessness and children. First Christianity doesn't believe that there could ever properly be such a thing as a child of one's own – so the promised solution does not and cannot exist for Christianity. But second, and more radically still, Christianity doesn't believe in the desperation of childlessness. Thus we have a misconceived answer, to a misconceived problem.

Let me take, first of all, the supposed solution to the problem – a child of one's own. Baptism – the rite of reception for children in the Christian world and thus the rite which serves to define the meaning of children for Christians – baptism, knows absolutely nothing of the possibility of one having a child of one's own. Or to put it better, it quite consciously sets its face against any such possibility.

One thing which is immediately striking about this rite of reception, baptism – putting it alongside other rites of reception for children – is just that parents have no part in it. They are effaced, displaced, indeed replaced. Take baptism as it is prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer. Parents are mentioned only once in the whole service, and that is in the rubrics – the stage directions – where it is anticipated that parents will take the initiative in seeking baptism for their child. After that, though, they are thoroughly and systematically ignored – indeed, good custom in certain times and places discouraged parents from even attending their child's baptism. And the key roles in the service are taken by godparents – they do what you might have expected the parents to do. The godparents name the child; they make the solemn promises to be made on the child's behalf; and they give an undertaking to ensure that the child is properly brought up and educated in the Christian faith. The godparents, in other words, solemnly take on and take up responsibilities which might naturally be expected to belong to the parents – and as if to underline the displacing of flesh and blood, relatives were very commonly forbidden from undertaking the role of godparents.

How did this come about? In the Gospel lesson we hear Christ repudiating natural kinship and instituting one quite differently founded. 'Who is my mother or my brother?' he asks when he is told that his family are knocking at the door of the synagogue – and declares: 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and my sister and my mother.'

I don't have space to argue the point fully here, but this is just one of the most explicit statements of the New Testament's thorough-going reconfiguration of worldly patterns of kinship. In shorthand – the New Testament messes with families.

Now, we know very well that this reconfiguration of kinship was taken up in the highly self-conscious counter-cultural practice of monasticism, whereby the terms 'brother', 'father', 'sister' and 'mother' are no longer used in a worldly fashion, but, following the usage of Christ, for those new and true kin whose kinship lies in seeking to know and do the will of God. But we also need to notice that the invention of godparenthood was intended to take this reconfiguration of kinship well beyond the confines of the monastery. In the rite of baptism every child is unkinned and re-kinned according to the same pattern – their worldly kin, the kin of blood and marriage, are set to one side, as the child

is placed in a new and spiritual kinship. Teenagers, we know, are normally pretty keen to disown their parents – but they very rarely disown their parents as thoroughly as those parents are disowned in baptism.

So – baptism is an explicit repudiation of the very thing which is promised to the infertile, namely a child of one's own. But to compound the difficulty, remember that the 'child of one's own' is intended to be a solution to the desperation of childless – when, as I as now suggest, Christianity not only rejects the solution, but doesn't recognise the problem in quite that form. For, no matter whatever sympathy and concern Christianity may and should show for the childless – you must take that for granted, since I cannot say any more about it this evening – Christianity doesn't believe in the tragedy and desperation of childlessness. And if baptism is the sign of Christianity's denial of the possibility of ever having a child of one's own, we might take the practice of avowed virginity as Christianity's equally strident proclamation of the non-tragic nature of childlessness.

The very early institution of sexual renunciation within Christian circles was a direct challenge to a moral and social order in regard to marriage and procreation which must have seemed impregnable prior to this challenge. As the great historian Peter Brown puts it: the ancient city 'Unexacting in so many ways in sexual matters, . . . [nonetheless] expected its citizens to expend a requisite proportion of their energy begetting and rearing legitimate children to replace the dead. Whether through conscious legislation, such as that of Emperor Augustus, which penalized bachelors and rewarded families for producing children, or simply through the unquestioned weight of habit, young men and women were discretely mobilized to use their bodies for reproduction. The pressure on young women was inexorable. For the population of the Roman Empire to remain stationary, it appears that each woman would have had to have produced an average of five children. Young girls were recruited early for their task. The median age of Roman girls at marriage may have been as low as fourteen.'² In the context of such heavy expectation bearing down on women, and on men, expectations that they would have and raise children, the Christian practice of avowed virginity was an explicit challenge, announcing that, contrary to the ruling ideology, childlessness was neither individually nor collectively nor socially, tragic.

Why not tragic? Well, just to make one point, connected with what I have been saying thus far – the single or childless do not in a properly Christian community, contrary to how the world sees it, lie outside and beyond the nexus of kinship. Of course, they can lie somewhat outside the nexus of worldly kinship constituted by blood and marriage, that nexus which typically provides our regular sense of social connection and belonging. But kinship has been reconfigured and reconstituted, so that for Christianity, or at least for Christianity properly conceived and practiced, worldly childlessness is not childlessness at all – and ought not to be so experienced in a properly Christian community. Augustine implicitly makes the point when he insists that the Virgin Mary's honour consists not in

² B rown, *The Body and Society*, 6; on general demographic patterns and trends in the early Christian period, see B.W. Frier, 'Demography', in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd edition, vol. xi, *The High Empire, A.D. 70–192*, ed. A. Bowman, P. Garnsey and D. Rathbone (Cambridge, 2000), 787–816.

her bearing Christ, but in doing his will. Or, to put it as it ought to be put on Mothering Sunday, but very rarely is – there are many with children as the world sees it who have none; many who have none who, in the kingdom of God and not only in monasteries and convents, are mothers ten times over.

I have been protesting that the conceiving of children through a certain lens of worldly thinking, the sort of thinking which has tended to govern popular discourse about childlessness, is profoundly misguided, judged from a Christian point of view. So how should we conceive children, Christianly speaking?

The Church of England's service of baptism, to which I have already referred, not only displaces or replaces natural parents, but also has a word to say about children – most notably by including the story from the Gospel in which Christ, overriding the objections of the disciples, suffers the children to be brought to him, and blesses them. The early church was sometimes a bit ambivalent about children, and from time to time in later Christian history, some – such as the Shakers and Tolstoi to name two at random – declared that procreation was a mistake. Not so said Augustine, in a ringing declaration which settled in his day and since, Christian orthodoxy on this point: even 'if there had been no sin, marriage would have been worthy of the happiness of paradise, and would have given birth to children to be loved'.³

So Christianity is pro-natalist we might say – not pro-natalist in the sense which holds up as an object of natural, overriding and incorrigible desire, 'a child of one's own', without the provision of which life is tragic – but still pro-natalist. Christ blessed children and children are a blessing. But how? In what way? What does that mean?

The thought that children are a blessing trips off the tongue. It is easily said, but I am not sure that even Christian parents know what to say if they were asked to explain what that might mean. So let me end with one thought on the subject – a thought about a way (not the way, but a way, one of the ways), in which children are a blessing. And my thought is that children are a blessing just because they enact and proclaim the Gospel to us.

I am going to seem to change the subject for a moment. Anselm – the great 11th century Archbishop of Canterbury – famously asked the question: 'Why did God become man?' But for Augustine there was a prior question. Why did God become a baby? After all, as Augustine says, God could have become man without becoming first a child. The Greek and Roman Gods were always metamorphising and manifesting themselves in this or that form or appearance, without going through the bother of gestation. Why did God go to the extra trouble of becoming a baby?

Well, Augustine and others said that God's humility in sharing in human life is expressed most fully by his sharing even in our human birth. And that is surely right. But I think there is something more to say even beyond saying that.

³ CD, xiv, 23.

If I offered you another-shout-out-the-answer opportunity – one which again risks some coarse unpleasantness – I might ask you: what do babies do? Projectile vomiting is not the answer I am seeking. So let me cut to chase and tell you the answer I am looking for. Babies tend to love wholly and unconditionally those to whom they are given. Parents may do nothing very special to elicit this love. They may hopelessly fail to deserve it. They may be wholly unworthy of the devotion which the child gives to them. But notwithstanding any of that, children love those to whom they are given in that helpless and trusting way which babies have.

Now when Christ became a baby, Christ thereby acted out in a humble and human way a parable of the metaphysical truth which is the meaning of his life and death – that in him God loves the world, loves those to whom he gives himself, with utter and unguarded and unconditional love, whether or not that love is noticed, or deserved or heeded or returned. Why did God become a baby? That Christ might graciously, in this stage of his life, enact the gospel which is the meaning of his life taken as a whole – as this small moment of his life, his babyhood, represents and depicts the rest.

But then we can say that this natural feature of any and every child's life is, Christianly conceived, meaningful beyond whatever natural joy it may bring to each and every parent. For each and every child born after Christ, points to and enacts the Gospel of God's unconditional love for the world, in the generous and unconditional love which he or she offers to his or her parents.

There is no such thing as a child of one's own; children are not an answer to the tragedy of childlessness, because it is not tragic – but children are a blessing, properly conceived, and one of the ways they are a blessing is just in their providing a parable of the love of God himself.