



Well, some men and women do manage to marry people who are just like the parents they had when they were little. A woman might find a man who is strong and protective just as her father used to be. A man might marry a woman who is as gentle and nurturing as his mother always was. And some people do find that a particular new friend, teacher, doctor or even minister is just as strong and problem-solving as they hoped. They have received the answer to their prayers and that is wonderful.

Except that then there is a sad, inexplicable tendency, much further down the line, to find yourself becoming ungrateful, turning against the person concerned. It is as though the “answer to your prayers” is not what you actually needed after all.

Henrik Ibsen wrote a famous play called “A Doll’s House” in which a woman called Nora has married a man who is strong, protective and generous, just like her father. He provides her with a lovely home, shields her from the harsher realities of the world, forgives her when, in her innocence, she gets into serious financial trouble. What more could she ask for? But at the end of the play she announces that she is leaving him because she is nothing more than a doll in a doll’s house. She is not living as a real human being in the real world. She craves the dignity even of sorting out her own problems. She does not want to revert to a childhood, when “Daddy” did everything for her. She has moved on.

This, by the way, was written in the eighteen sixties, a hundred years before the Women’s Liberation Movement. And at about the same time Charlotte Bronte was writing a novel with a hero called Edward Rochester who, despite all his striding around in riding boots and shouting orders to all and sundry, was actually looking for a strong woman like Jane Eyre who would not simply pander to his every whim but who would challenge him, surprise him, infuriate him but also empower him to sort out the mess that was his life.

You see, no matter how much we want to revert to a state of childhood and surround ourselves with people who will protect us and solve all our problems for us, relationships like this end up turning sour. We resent powerful people for being so capable that they render us incapable. We do not like finding ourselves utterly dependent upon another person. We may put someone on a pedestal as a “god” but then we find ourselves looking for excuses to tear them down again.

More than anything else in life we need our own dignity. We need the responsibility for our own lives. Yes, at times, when we are exhausted and overwhelmed by problems we feel that we would give anything for a strong, competent person to come along, lift it all off our shoulders and whisk us away to a safe place where we could live happily ever after. But deep down this is not the answer to our prayers.

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Do not you think that Jesus knew this perfectly well? That was why He did not come into the world as the kind of leader who would say “*Leave everything to me. I’ll sort it all out.*” That was why he was not the kind of divinity who would hurl thunderbolts, stir up storms and blast disbelievers into oblivion. That was why he was not the kind of religious teacher who would rule his followers with a rod of iron and expect them to have no thoughts, opinions or beliefs other than the ones he personally dictated. That was why he

came out with radical, provocative statements which would stir up heated arguments, draw out original thinking, and produce a sparky rather than a static religion.

Do you remember the time when he got into an argument over the bread of life? One of the favourite stories in Jewish history was about Moses, who got his people out of slavery and across the desert into a new land. Travelling in the desert, food was scarce so, in answer to Moses' prayers, God had given this stuff called *manna* which appeared on the ground every morning and could be baked into a kind of bread. It was remembered reverently as "bread of heaven," a sign that Moses was a true man of God. And if Jesus was everything he claimed to be, then why could he not produce this heavenly bread all day, every day? Then there would no problems with hunger at any rate.

"Yeah right," said Jesus, "*your ancestors were not exactly grateful for the bread of heaven. If you read the story more carefully, you'll see that all they did was grumble.*" He was right. First they had grumbled because they had no meat. So God sent some flocks of quail for them to kill and roast over the camp fires. Then they grumbled because they did not have leeks and melons and cucumbers. I mean, melons! Where was Moses supposed to get melons from in the middle of the desert? And if God had produced melons, would that have been enough? Of course it would not. They would then have wanted smoked salmon and caviar. Because, at the end of the day, they wanted food which they could grow and produce and prepare and enjoy for themselves. They did not want to be fed like baby birds in a nest.

Which is why Jesus said, *I am offering you the bread of life. I am offering you a share of my nature, my divinity, my ministry, my life. Take this and you will not be hungry again.* He was not offering himself as a god who would take control but as a God who would bring out the best in them.

He was not offering himself as a god who would make them feel woefully inadequate but as a God who said, "*Come with me, I need people like you.*"

He was not offering himself as a god who would hide his people away in a safe place but as a God who would give them his power and lead them in the conflict against violence, sickness, greed and corruption, to make the world a safer place.

He was not offering himself as a god who was occupied exclusively with their personal well-being but as a God who was telling them to go out and take the Gospel of peace and reconciliation to the whole world- and who would never allow them to find personal satisfaction until they had done it.

This was the true bread of heaven, the nature of God taking root and growing in every man and woman, allowing them their dignity, giving them their freedom, inspiring them with a mission, empowering them with creativity, energy and compassion. It was the bread of divine identity, the bread which would give fullness of life and a true satisfaction which would last for ever.

*"To those who received him, who believed in him, wrote St John, "Jesus Christ gave the power to become children of God."*

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It is Christmas night, a night of expectation and celebration. What are you praying for? What are the hopes and dreams in our minds tonight?

They might sound as feeble as the words of the prayers spoken in our drama: the dustman who wants to find hidden treasure, the woman who wants to be young and beautiful again, the boy who wants to get rid of his spots, the accountant who wants to hang onto his money.

But on the other hand, they might be as deep and profound as the longings you glimpsed in their hearts: the poor man who wants some self-respect; the lonely woman who is searching for a more permanent way of being attractive; the married couple who need the freedom to be open with each other; the confused boy who wants to fit in with his peer group; the vicar who needs to talk to a God who is in the real world but does not quite know how.

Whatever our prayers, whatever our thoughts, there will be doubt and fear, pain and weariness, anger and despair. And can Jesus Christ be the answer?

Jesus Christ brought God right into the real world. Jesus Christ brought God right into the lives of men and women who were just as confused, just as frightened, just as cynical, just as unhappy as we are. And no, he did not stage a take-over bid and put the world to rights- just like that. He sat down beside us, talked things through with us, showed us what could be possible with faith and love and commitment, rolled up his sleeves, worked alongside us, poured out his life for us, came back from death for us, filled our hearts with his spirit and gave us the right to be called children of God.

And in his name men and women have healed diseases, stood up against injustice, freed slaves, fed the poor, comforted the heartbroken, explored the mysteries of the universe and gone a long way towards making the kingdom of God on earth.

In his name, men and women have found an identity, a freedom, a personal dignity which has kept them strong and saved them from despair, even in the hardest times.

In his name men and women have met God face to face and have seen for themselves the love and the wisdom and the power which is there for them and given to them.

The answer to all our prayers?

You decide.

Amen.