

*'Honour your father and mother.'*

This is the 5th Commandment. Here is a further reflection on the 10 Commandments. This month I skip to the 5th - particularly significant as we approach Mothering Sunday. The verse in Exodus goes on: *'so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.'* This tells us that this commandment was a key part of creating a settled community in a new land. Stable family groups, in which parents play a vital part, and in which the relationships of children with parents are signs of stability, are the building blocks of a flourishing society.

Those of us who were blessed to grow up in families in which our parents loved and cared for us without question or compromise can pay tribute to the confidence, peace and security it has given to us. We would be fools, though, to say that every parent and child relationship is necessarily a good thing. Some parents behave selfishly and cruelly towards their children. It would be difficult indeed for anyone who suffered at the hands of a cruel and abusive parent to honour them. Our ability to protect those in vulnerable families depends also on knowing what good parenting is about. We wish others to know the love that a caring mother can give. We hope that the gentle guidance of a good father is a model for those who seek to be fulfilled as people growing and flourishing in a world of joys and dangers.

Sometimes other people, besides our natural parents, act as good and true and loving life givers to us. The commandment calls on us to honour them too. I have just read one of the memoirs of Alan Johnson, the politician. Alan and his sister Linda found themselves on their own when Linda, a few years older than Alan, was 16. Their father had left and their mother died. Remarkably Linda took responsibility for Alan. So he did not have to go into a children's home. It is clear that he is deeply and eternally grateful for the loving parental commitment of his older sister.

We have read or could tell of similar stories, all of us. We also know of families where the relationships of parents and children are seriously wrong. So, when I take to my heart the 5th commandment, I want to do several things.

Firstly, I want to affirm with gratitude and joy the loving security that my parents gave me, and honour them for who they were. In fact, the older I get the more I want to honour them. Perhaps because I can see how I love them both for their gifts and for their failings. I don't resent them for decisions they made which I found difficult to accept at the time. I see that they thought they were the best decisions they could make. I am who I am because of them, and, in some ways, despite them!

Secondly, I want to give thanks for the ways in which parents and their children, creating stable family groups enable their members to flourish as human beings and reach out beyond themselves to care about others too, people who don't belong to their family. Churches and other religious institutions can be places where these relationships continue to be fostered. So can other non-religious institutions - both well run homes and well run social and work places. Honour your father and mother is about the respect that different generations can have for one another. The more the older, middle and younger generations mix the healthier the society.

And, finally, thirdly I want to welcome into the description of those who can be honoured as fathers and mothers anyone who exercises a sustained parental role. Families are rightly now recognised as being made up of single parents, parents of the same sex, parents of

both sexes, and families where the grandparents, or uncles, aunts, even neighbours and friends exercise parental roles. Let us honour them.