

So, what then is “family”? Last week, from the Old Testament, we concluded that the family is multi-dimensional and God has the family at the heart of the community, the nation, the world. Furthermore, the family is to be characterised by faith, learning, honour, love. As we work at the care and development of family, as is our shared responsibility, God blesses our faithfulness.

When we turn to the New Testament we find that Jesus defines the family still further. In some ways He also makes things a little bit challenging for us; makes it more personal. In Matthew's gospel we heard a confrontational text that Christians might be tempted to ignore or simply try and explain away. Jesus said, **“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law - a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.’”** Wow. That's hardly what one might expect to hear as a guide to good Christian family life is it? Yet, oddly enough it is. Let's understand something of the context of this.

Jesus was speaking to His disciples and bringing home the realities of truly being a disciple. To be a Christ follower is to commit all of your life to Him. Intellectually we can do this but actually living it out is something more of a challenge. Jesus understood this only too well. His disciples had given up a lot to be with Him, to follow Him, to serve Him and yet there were many ways in which they still clung to their old ways of thinking and acting. They demonstrated how true it is that the Christian faith is a journey walking with Jesus and not solely a destination. Through the walk God slowly and surely changes and moulds us. The disciples, just like us, easily responded to the positive aspects of the gospel. Their Jewish background clearly understood the priority and obligations of family. But Jesus was something of an enigma. Here was a man in his early thirties, whose father it seems had already died, with a mother, younger brothers and sisters to care for. More than that, who under Jewish Law had the obligation and responsibility for their care. Yet, here He was, wandering about the countryside preaching about the coming kingdom of God. Had He forgotten His duty? But maybe, because it was the hot season between the harvests, He wasn't needed at home. The Kingdom of God, in the minds of the disciples, and surely in the light of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, was a place of great joy and peace, of harmonious work and pleasant endeavour. It was only to be expected that the joy of positive, happy family relationships would be at the very heart of the Kingdom. Wouldn't they?

What Jesus does here is focus the disciples on the reality of the world that we live in and on the centrality of real discipleship that puts Christ at the very centre of everything – something that others, family included, would not always see so positively in this world. Christianity is Christo-centric. In other words, everything revolves around Jesus Christ. As Jesus taught using hyperbole that it is better to cut out your eye or off your arm than persist in sin, so too Jesus uses the extremes of parallelism to consider the role of the family in contrast to the love and obedience we owe Him/God first.

The outcome of this means that, in this world, as we well know, individuals have their own personal intellect and free will. If we want to follow the Lord and be obedient to His teachings this will occasionally bring us into conflict with others, particularly if they are of a different intellectual or religious persuasion. Jesus' words then speak of a consequential reality of being a Christian. Who we become may lead to serious consequences with our families. Jesus re-enforces the blessing of Moses that recognised Levi in Deuteronomy 9:33 when he stated **“He said of his father and mother, ‘I have no regard for them.’ He did not recognize his brothers or acknowledge his own children, but he watched over your word and guarded your covenant.”** We are to place the Lord first in all things.

Over the years some of you may, as I have done, met with people from other faiths who have become Christians. Some of these have been ostracised from the families, from their communities, even villages, work and birthplaces. In such places becoming a Christian and following Jesus has immediate, colossal impact. To become a Christian may be to lose one's family completely.

Jesus was Himself willing to take this risk. In Mark 3 we are told of an incident early in Jesus' ministry. Jesus mother and brothers had come to take Jesus home, back to Nazareth. We are told the reason for this in Mark 3:20-21, **"Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'"** Jesus family thought Jesus' call by God and His response had driven Him mad. He had seemingly given up on His obligations and His actions were no reflecting poorly on His family. But in whose eyes?

This brings us to an apparent dichotomy. Is the unity of family not so important as faith in God, as faith in Jesus? Does one oppose another? Will our family be our enemies? That hardly seems like a great life goal! Let's look at it another way in two key areas.

Firstly, our own faith in God and a desire to see all of one's own family know the Lord as well as we do, or even better, is the greatest thing we can do for them, or ourselves, in this world or the next. We know that if our family knows and walks with the Lord they will not only inherit eternal salvation but we know that Jesus will walk with them every day of their lives. There could be nothing better. Moreover, the Scriptures, as we have already seen, point us to the critical role family is to have as the centre, the core of any Christian society. When there is faith in the family the fruits of the Spirit of God and the character of God will flow into that family. A family that walks with the Lord will experience His love, and love for each other, at the deepest of levels. Because God loves to bless and to bless faithfulness particularly, the family that walks with Him will see His provision, protection and love.

Secondly, Jesus points us to His definition of family. In Mark 3:33-34, when told His family had come to take Him away Jesus, asked the assembled: **"Who are my mother and my brothers?" Then He looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."** The Body of Christ is a family. This is a family bound together by the Spirit that encompasses people from all walks of life, irrespective of gender, race, culture, social status or anything else and we are all equal before God. Equally loved, equally called and equally important in His mission. Moreover, the Spirit pours God's love into us so that it can flow from us into the members of the Body and out into the Community. Our duty of care is expanded many-fold, just as the care and love we are to receive now comes from many more sources. This is something that the Christian community always needs to work at – not holding the blessing but pouring it out to others.

In this context we can go back to Matthew and better understand Jesus words when He says, **"Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."** As is so true in many ways, when we give up our narrow definitions and desires and fully embrace the way of Jesus we find that we are more than blessed. In comparison to the priority of Jesus family and anything else pales into insignificance. But embracing what He wants of us He equips us to do, to be, to embrace so much more. In His mission in this world family is vitally important, the wide family of believers as well as our immediate and extended families. To give up our limited ability and open ourselves to His resourcing when seen like this just makes so much more sense.

Such as deliberate sacrifice is what Jesus has done Himself. By giving Himself us up for us, by sacrificing what He might have otherwise done as a man with a normal lifespan on earth,

Jesus instead created a whole, new, wider family and released the Holy Spirit to empower. Rather than a limited, restricted love for immediate family and friends Jesus' sacrifice has impacted and saved humanity. We have the blessing of being involved in this as well.

And let's not forget that Jesus' own family story has a positive ending too. Jesus had four brothers, James, Joseph (James), Judas (Jude), Simon and a number of unnamed sisters. We know that His mother Mary came to understand Jesus' mission. Along with a number of other woman disciples Mary was with Jesus supporting Him to the end. Of His brothers and sisters we do not know a great deal, other than about James, who is named not only in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3 but also by the Jewish historian Josephus. It is generally understood James was the oldest of Jesus' siblings. James became the head of the Christian church in Jerusalem and we know from Galatians 1:18-19 that the apostle Paul met with Peter and James in Jerusalem. Our conflicts in faith or because of faith within our families should not be seen as discouraging but sometimes a necessary thing on the path to our families discovering the Lord and for us learning better ways to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. Like chess ... we are in it for the long game when it comes to families. I prayed for many years, decades, for my mother and step-father to come back to faith and they ended their lives in a good place with the Lord, my step-father even becoming a verger or deacon in a significant church in the middle of London from which my mother was buried. God answers our heart-felt prayers for family if they are open to Him, even when we don't always get it right with our approach. Similarly, with our prayers and desires for our children. Never give up I say! God loves families.

As a church we are family to each other. Like all families there are some we find it really easy to get on with and others who are more challenging. God loves each one of us and is working out His plan through us.

We finish today with the words of the apostle Paul. A man who many scholars believe gave up, or lost, his own family in pursuit of the gospel. Some scholars believe as a Pharisee Paul was married into a wealthy Jewish family that disowned him when he became a Christian. Paul considered nothing more important than following Jesus. Yet Paul had great love for the family. In Ephesians we hear him say ... **“This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.... For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”**

God has placed us in families and in His world-wide family, so that we might experience and share His power and love in a multitude of ways. The family is both the microcosm of the Kingdom and one of its fullest expressions. For all our ups and downs brothers and sisters, we are family, the Family of God

Amen