

Ordinary 10

10th June 2018

Readings

2 Cor.4:13 - 5:1

Mark 3:20-35

Reflection

'My sisters and brothers in Christ' – so I address the gathered people of God at worship or begin my messages to our wider diocese or address our three-Tikanga church. Sisters and brothers – family of God, whanau. Who are these sisters and brothers? What unites us and what divides us? What demons do we harbour? What does it even mean to BE family?

Last Thursday at the Transitional Cathedral, I joined a small group of worshippers gathered for a Te Reo Eucharist – a family of five tourists from Delhi, a Scotsman, an English woman and a handful of kiwi Pakeha – brothers and sisters around Christ's table. During the recent week of prayer for Christian unity, I prayed the Apostles Creed with brothers and sisters in Christ across denominations – those who accept gay ministers, those who don't accept the ordination of women.

This week I offer my love and prayers to theologically conservative brothers heading to GAFCON (the Global Anglican Futures Conference) in Jerusalem, brothers considering leaving the Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia; those who believe we have strayed from the authority of scripture – while I don't agree with them, they are my brothers in Christ – *all* of us are people of brokenness, all of us – by the grace of God - family, whanau.

The recent beginning of Ramadan reminded me of my own visit to the local mosque, the gracious sharing of food, breaking fast together, women and children segregated from men, yet praying together. I was joyfully reunited with a Somali woman – Marianne – with whom I'd studied at university, and whose aunty had embraced me years earlier at Orton Bradley park when I'd ventured to mention Marianne's name. On that occasion I had been humbled as a whole busload of Somali women and children had emerged from their vehicle with prayer mats at noon, to pray, before enjoying a picnic in the beautiful surroundings. Family. Then there was the recent

multi-cultural celebration and shared prayer for peace and harmony at the local Buddhist temple for Buddha's birthday – family. Yesterday I went walking with family – my single daughter and 4 dogs! – a many-legged, exuberant and rather muddied, ball-chasing family!

What does family mean to you? What did it mean to Jesus? To those He healed? To His mother, and brothers and sisters? To His opponents?

In today's gospel, when Jesus' family come to restrain him, hearing that he has 'gone out of his mind', Jesus has some shocking words to share with those gathered around him:

'Who are my mother and my brothers?'

And looking at those who sat around him, he said,

'Here are my mother and my brothers!

Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

Maybe Jesus' relatives were dismayed that the first-born son wasn't supporting his family but was gallivanting around Galilee as a self-appointed prophet. Or maybe they wanted him, as Messiah, to have bigger and better ambitions, such as promising a revolution instead of preaching and healing the sick. The Gospel of Mark does not explain; it merely sets up a showdown of sorts when the family arrives to seize Jesus.. The story told in the wider context (Mark 3:20-35), sets Jesus' family in comparison to influential religious leaders (the scribes based in Jerusalem). Both groups express an inability to understand who Jesus really is. The religious authorities conclude he is possessed by Satan. His family assumes he has lost his sanity. In an ancient setting, these diagnoses were roughly equivalent to each other.¹

The scene underscores how those who presumably were in great positions to make sense of Jesus still were not immediately able to see him as God's agent. As Jesus

¹From "What Makes a Family?" Matthew L. Skinner, ON Scripture, Odyssey Networks, 2012

announced and re-inaugurated God's intentions for human flourishing, many could not overcome the disorienting character of his message. Even close relatives and religious insiders were bewildered by what he said and did, which threatened to disrupt so many aspects of human society. Status quo – even oppressive, life-denying status quo – can feel safer, preferable, to the disarming threat of change.

“Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? ... Look, here [these people seated around me] are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does God's will is my brother, sister and mother.”

This message would be good news for Mark's earliest readers who, as followers of Christ, found themselves estranged from their biological families. But challenging for Jesus' relatives and for others with high regard for customary notions of honour and social stability. Isn't it easier to scapegoat those who threaten social stability? Isn't it easier to demonise those whom we don't understand, or those whom we fear? Split, divide, invent barriers, build walls?

Jesus redefines the criteria for who constitutes his true family. Jesus makes a claim about what it might mean to belong to other people. He makes a claim about identity. For Jesus, family — at least, one type of family — is a community of people joined as an expression of their commitment to discover and manifest God's will.

I wonder what our Catechism has to say in this regard?

*How does the Anglican Church regard other Christians?*²

Anglicans see other Christians as sisters and brothers in Christ, and pray and work for the unity which is Christ's will for the Church.

And - *How does the Anglican Church regard members of other faiths?*³

² p. 936 A New Zealand Prayer Book | He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa

³ *ibid*

Anglicans believe that all people are created in God's image and need to find meaning and purpose beyond themselves. All living faiths witness in some way to the reality of God, but in Jesus Christ God's revelation is unique.

In our NZPB service of Thanksgiving for Creation and Redemption, at the passing of the Peace, we say:

E te whānau / Brothers and sisters,

Christ calls us to live in unity. And we respond:

We seek to live in the Spirit of Christ.⁴

In our liturgy of Thanksgiving and Praise, at the Peace we say:

Blessed be Christ the Prince of Peace

who breaks down the walls that divide.⁵

Jesus did not abolish the idea of family or household. I don't believe that today's passage suggests that he discounts his own flesh and blood as family. It goes too far to suggest that Jesus overthrew his culture's values about family, society and religion — in this passage or any other. But he does consistently unsettle and sometimes redirect those values. The parable of the Good Samaritan, the encounters with the Samaritan woman at the well, and the Syrophenician woman...

When Jesus teaches, heals and makes pronouncements, everything gets put up for renegotiation. Old values aren't necessarily flawed, simply by virtue of their being old or established. But God's presence in the world, manifested through Jesus' words and actions, repeatedly upends conventional assumptions about what's "real" or what's "normal." It upends them, not to change them for change's sake, but so that we might reconsider just how they can be authentic manifestations of who God is and how God

⁴ p.466, A New Zealand Prayer Book | He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa

⁵ Ibid, p.485

can be known. For God wills to be known by us, in the particularity of our real lives and relationships.

Which brings me to conclude with a reflection from Joy Cowley⁶ – one that continues to call me beyond the family that first loved and shaped me, through the family that currently surrounds me, to the family of fullest humanity experienced and redeemed through Christ – a family that the Triune God loved into being and calls ‘Good, very good’

⁶ *‘The Centre of the Circle,’* p.113, Psalms for the Road, Joy Cowley, Catholic Supplies (NZ) Ltd. 2005