

Brancepeth Sermon
26 November 2023

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Ephesians 1:15-end

Matthew 25:31-end

Psalms 95:1-7

Open our ears, O Lord,

to hear your word and know your voice.

Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,

that we may serve you today and always.

Amen

I thought it was about time we had a sermon on *family values*.

It is not something that has come up a lot at St Brandon's,

but I'm here this morning to put that right -

and, in fact, to put *you* right.

And when I say ‘family values’, I obviously mean the recognition that the nuclear family is the basic building block of society, that it is under threat by all manner of pernicious forces, especially wokery and fecklessness, and that it needs to be defended at all costs.

And just to be clear: when I say ‘nuclear family’, I mean a man, a woman, two or *maybe* three children, and probably a dog, ideally living in a house that they own for themselves, and driving a Honda Civic.

Such families are the cornerstone of decency, they are the epitome of respectability, and it is *patently* the duty of the Christian church, and of all right-thinking Christians within the church, to lead the good fight against all the forces that, in our society, are seeking to destroy the family as we know it.

<*sigh*> No - I'm sorry, I can't keep that up.

Not least because, if this was *really* the sermon I wanted to preach

I would probably need at this point to

start listing all these 'destructive forces',

and I would end up wagging my finger at anyone who

is *not* a member of this kind of family -

anyone who is not *respectable* by this standard,

anyone who is not *decent*,

anyone who does not fit neatly into this picture,

and *especially* anyone who seems to be

thumbing their nose at it.

In fact, the whole *point* of a sermon like that would be

to get us all riled up against *people who don't fit*.

But there is one huge problem with trying to preach *that* sermon.

And that huge problem is that one of the people

I'd be getting us all riled up against,

one of the people who is really not respectable by that standard,

who doesn't fit at all well into that picture of family values,

one of the people who seems to thumb his nose at it,
is - well - *Jesus*.

And it's not a bad rule of thumb when writing a sermon
to think long and hard about the direction
in which you have chosen to travel
if that direction leads you to denounce
Jesus' lifestyle choices.

And it is one of the savage ironies of Christian history
one of the truly bizarre plot twists between
his time and our own,
that the followers of *Jesus of Nazareth*, of all people,
people who acknowledge Jesus as king,
have become such staunch champions of 'family values' -
because one of the most shocking things about the
Jesus we claim to follow
was how insistently he called people to rethink
exactly those family values.

To understand Jesus' teaching about this,
we need to understand the situation in which he taught.

His was a society in which family really did matter,
really was the basic building block of social life.

In fact, it was a culture in which any individual's identity
was completely bound up with their family's identity -
a culture in which one of the most important things
you could know about somebody
was who their parents were, and
who their other family members were.

In Matthew 13, for instance,

when Jesus comes back to Nazareth,

the crowd in the synagogue say,

⁶⁵'Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary?

And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and

Judas? ⁶⁶And are not all his sisters with us?'

The crowd are saying: we know *exactly* who you are -

we know the family to which you belong,

don't you go pretending to be someone or something else!

And the culture in which Jesus grew up was one in which your family *responsibilities* defined you.

So Jesus would have been expected to grow up to be a *real* man -

which would have meant, a family man,

the head of a household

the provider and protector,

someone who looked after elderly parents,

someone who looked after the women and children,

someone who took all these responsibilities seriously,

and let his position in society be defined by

how well he lived up to that image.

But Jesus did *not* fit into this template.

He wandered the countryside as a homeless itinerant,

surrounded by a group of friends and followers

who were mostly not his relatives, not his family at all.

And when in Matthew 12 his real family comes to collect him

- probably to try to get him to come home

and take up his proper family responsibilities - he said

‘Who *is* my mother, and who *are* my brothers?’

⁴⁹And pointing to his disciples, he said,

‘*Here* are my mother and my brothers!

⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven
is my brother and sister and mother.’

How’s *that* for family values?

And there even some evidence that

Jesus’ opponents accused him

and his male followers of not being *real* men,

because they weren’t doing what men were expected to do.

They were accused, it seems, of barely being men at all –

of having, metaphorically,

emasculated themselves.

But those words that Jesus said

when his mother and brothers came to get him,

indicate that he saw things very differently.

He was surrounded by his followers, by the crowd,

predominantly a crowd of poor people

– the peasantry of Galilee –

many of whom didn't have stable family situations,
many of whom were probably out on the streets with him
because they didn't have any normal home to go to,
people who were often hungry, people who were often thirsty,
people that respectable, settled society regarded as 'strangers' –
that is, as people whose family wasn't known,
or whose families didn't acknowledge them,
people who didn't have a recognisable name,
people who weren't part of the proper order of society.

And these people, these misfits, gathered around Jesus,
they took Jesus as their king,
because they were eager to see a *new* order,
one in which *even if* they had no family on earth,
even if they didn't have a place in society as it stood,
they would be fully included;
one in which they would have a *place*,
one in which *nobody* would treat them as indecent.

And Jesus says of this ragtag crowd around him:

'this is my family',

'these are my mother and my brothers'.

And we hear that again in the passage

we heard as our gospel reading this morning,

Jesus asks us to imagine him sitting on a throne in heaven,

and welcoming people because they have welcomed *him*,

honouring people because they have fed and clothed *him*.

And he imagines them asking,

³⁷'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food,

or thirsty and gave you something to drink?'

³⁸'And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you,

or naked and gave you clothing?'

³⁹'And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison

and visited you?'

⁴⁰'And the king will answer them,

'Truly I tell you, *just as you did it to one of the least of these*

who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

So Jesus points to the crowd around him -
the hungry, the thirsty, the ostracised,
the indecent and unrespectable - and says,
'These are my people.

If you hurt them, you're hurting *me*;

If you despise them, you're despising *me*;

If you treat them as not fitting in with your standards of decency,
you're using those standards to exclude *me*.

But if you treat them with respect,

you're treating *me* with respect;

if you honour them, you're honouring *me*;

if you feed them, clothe them, welcome them,

you're feeding *me*, clothing *me* and welcoming *me*.

This is my family. *These* are my people, my flesh and blood.'

Paul, at the end of this morning's passage from Ephesians,
has a different metaphor for it.

Jesus doesn't just treat this bunch of misfits,
this group of people who don't fit,

this group without proper families of their own,
as his own *family*;
he treats them as his own *body*.

If you hurt *them*, you're hurting *him*;
if you help them, you're helping him.

They are his *flesh and blood* in that sense too.

All of this means, I think, that we should be very, very wary
of making too close a connection between
Christianity and so-called 'family values'.

Of course families matter.

Of course we want to help people experience
caring, trustworthy relationships.

Of course we want a safe environment
in which children can grow up.

But the idea that there is one neat template for this,
one way of relating, the *proper* family,
that defines decency and respectability,

that defines the right way to relate and to behave –
well, that is a truly bizarre thing for followers of
Jesus of all people to insist upon.

We end up belittling those whom Jesus gathered to himself,
and so we end up belittling Jesus himself.

We end up shaming those whom Jesus honoured,
and so we end up shaming Jesus himself.

We end up excluding those whom Jesus included,
and so we end up excluding Jesus himself.

The kingdom of God, Jesus' community, Jesus' *family*,
is as open to the single person as it is to the married person;
it is as open to the widows and widowers
as much as to those whose spouses are still with them;
it is as open to the orphan, to the child in foster care,
to the adopted child, as to children living with their birth families;
it is as open to those who, because of divorce,
live between multiple families

as to those who live in one family;
it is as open to those whose families are
sprawling multigenerational messes
as to those who live in neat nuclear families;
it is as open to those whose real family is found
amongst their friends more than amongst their relatives,
as to those whose biological family is their home;
it is as open to those who have had to escape their families
or their spouses, for the sake of their own safety
as to those whose family relationships are safe and supportive;
it is as open to those whose families don't look anything like
the cookie-cutter family-values stereotype as to those who do.

In fact, it is if anything *more* open to those who are
marginalised, excluded, despised, rejected, criticised within our
society as it stands -
because those are the people Jesus gathered around himself.

And churches that seek to follow Jesus should be so open too.
We should be a *haven* for those who don't fit elsewhere,

rather than another source of shaming and condemnation;
we should be a *safe harbour* of welcome and affirmation
for those used to being judged and condemned
because of the way their family works or doesn't work.

Because in welcoming others, we welcome Jesus;
and in caring for others, we care for Jesus.

'These are *my* family, *my* flesh and blood', he says.

And we should see that we treat each other that way.

Amen