

## Sermon 09 June 2024

By Revd. Karen Adendorff

What is family - mother, father, child, brother sister...? Who belongs and who does not? In other words what standard or measure do we use to determine who is part of our family circle – is it name, birth, marriage...? Has our understanding or interpretation of family changed over the years and what has been the consequence of this?

Family is generally defined and understood to be a group of people related either by birth or affinity i.e. by marriage or other relationships. A unit that forms the basis for social order. According to Wikipedia, the purpose of the family is to maintain the well-being of its members and of society. In doing this families ideally offer structure, and safety. Historically, most human societies use family as the primary purpose of forming bonds, nurturing (care, support and training), and socialization. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family>)

In ancient times, family was considered the most basic social organisation, and it determined a man's social standing and personal worth. In Jewish custom families are bound to each other by several commanded responsibilities and sacred practices. The interpretation and practice of some these, as seen in Gospels, create conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders.

In society today we are confronted by many diverse forms in which families exist - single-parent families, foster families, same-sex couples, childfree families, child-headed households and those who are single/not married. Beliefs, attitudes and changing roles shape and are shaped by families – both positively and negatively. We see brokenness, unforgiveness and division within families as well as those caused by families, which plays itself out in society. And I think this state of affairs has to do with who has authority over us.

In the reading from Samuel there are two issues at play. The first is that Samuel intends for his sons to succeed him, and the people are not happy with this. Samuel's sons are clearly not worthy to do so but Samuel seems blind to their sins. So, the elders of Israel gather to resolve the leadership problems posed by Samuel's old age and his sons' sinful ways. This challenge of ethical and responsible leadership is still prevalent in our society today. We see it in the struggle for power, corruption and nepotism. We see it in the struggles and shenanigans taking place in our country right now between political parties in their jostling for position – in the who and how the new government should be formed. And we need to

pray for our leaders that they may be guided by the authority of God and seek the common good.

The second issue is that the people insist on having an earthly king because their neighbours – the other nations – all have a king, and they want to be just like them. They believe a king will provide security and protection against their enemies. A king is visible, God is not. They have forgotten what God has done for them – freeing them from slavery in Egypt, providing manna in the desert etc. - and so they seek to place their trust in an earthly king instead of trusting God. They are choosing to place themselves under the authority of a king rather than God. Samuel warns against this action. History tells us that some kings were very good, and some were very bad, and they suffered under those kings who were bad, just as Samuel warned they would.

Like the people of Israel, we too tend to allow all kinds of things to distract us from the ways of God. Rather than relying on, and acknowledging, God's lordship in all areas of our lives we seek to do things our way and to place ourselves under the authority of systems and principalities of this world that are not in line with God's ways. In the Corinthians reading Paul reminds us that everything in this life – our circumstances, human authority...- are temporary and that we need to "fix your eyes on what is unseen, what is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18, NIV).

In the Gospel reading we heard about the opposition Jesus faced from the scribes and his family. Both groups portray a mistaken belief about Jesus that reveals the brokenness found within households/families. Just think about the brokenness and divisions that are caused within our own families, communities – even the church - that are the result of misunderstanding or differing views or an insensitive word or action

The context of the Gospel reading this morning is that we have a story within a story: Firstly, in v21 we hear about Jesus' family who have come to "restrain him" or maybe to forcibly rescue him from the demanding crowd who were saying that he was out of his mind – mad. They said this because of the things he was saying and doing. The healing, forgiving of sins and casting out demons.

Then, in v22, we hear about the scribes who have come from Jerusalem and were spreading rumours, saying that Jesus had an unclean spirit and was in fact acting, or working, on behalf of Satan. By this they imply that only evil has the power/authority to cast out evil. No, says Jesus, in v23-30. This is illogical. Why would Satan empower

Jesus to destroy Satan's own kingdom. This will surely destroy Satan's power and bring an end to Satan's kingdom. Why would Satan do this to himself? It makes no sense. Jesus says that any kingdom, house or person that is divided within itself causes its own destruction. This is another way of saying that divisions make us our own worst enemies. Jesus goes on to warn them that all sin and blasphemy can be forgiven except that against the Holy Spirit. Mark does not tell us what Jesus meant by this. After all, Jesus is speaking in parables here, remember. But Eugene Petersen translates v29 in The Message version of the bible, as rejecting **"the very One who forgives, sawing off the branch on which you're sitting, severing by your own perversity (wilfulness) all connection with the One who forgives"** and you know what happens when you saw off a branch on which you are sitting!! In other words, to attribute the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan; to charge the Spirit of God with evil is to place oneself outside the authority of God by placing that authority in the hands of Satan. Thereby placing ourselves in a position where forgiveness becomes practically impossible.

Then in v31-35 Jesus goes back to the story of his family. When the crowd sitting around him, tell him that his mother, brothers and sisters are outside, asking for him, he asks, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" What a strange question. But then Jesus says, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3: 35) When Jesus makes this statement he disrupts their understanding of family, hospitality and belonging to the kingdom of God. It becomes a more inclusive relationship rather than an exclusive one. This exclusive type of relationship is something that marked the Jewish family and community as seen in their rules and laws about food, cleanliness, purity and defilement.

And the question we need to ask ourselves is, do we understand family, hospitality and the kingdom of God as Jesus did? Do we listen for, and do, the will of God? Now we might ask, what is the will of God? I believe, on a most basic/foundational level, the will of God is for us to place ourselves under the authority of God – to seek and follow God's ways. To love God and neighbour as ourselves. This love – this authority – will be lived out and seen in the families, communities, churches and societies of love, support and forgiveness that we create. So, we need to ask ourselves whether we are willing to place ourselves under God's authority and make our family circles bigger to include **"Whoever** does the will of God" as brother, sister and mother? Or will we continue to hold onto our self-righteousness and egos as we sit in judgement of others and exclude them from the family, hospitality and kingdom of God.

The collect we prayed this morning said, Our Father, from whom every family on earth takes its name: help us to do your will that as sisters and brothers of Christ we may love and serve you and one another. So, I pray that God may grant us a vision of his purpose and an assurance of his love and power as we seek to put this collect and Jesus' teachings into practice. Let us glorify the name of God in all the earth by living under the authority of God's love.

Amen