

Sermon for Year B Proper 5

The Text: Mark 3:20-35

Aren't families complex? They are all at the same time essential, wonderful, nurturing, as well as frustrating, infuriating and confusing. As we go through life in families we discover cultures, traditions, and unwritten rules about how we look after our own on the inside, and how we protect one another from people on the outside. For example, in one family many years ago, there was an unwritten rule about being criticized. One day someone outside the family criticized a young grandson called Peter publicly in front of his grandmother for doing something stupid. The grandmother then leapt to his defence saying: *'Now that's enough of that. Don't you forget, he's our Peter'*.

What an interesting reply. Now the grandmother would probably, with no hesitation, correct or tell Peter off if he did something wrong, but when criticism came from outside the family, she took charge of him, and came to his defense. The sub-text of her comment might have been something like this: *'Yes he might have done something wrong but he belongs to us'*. In other words, the importance of who you belong to, easily outweighs what you do wrong. Blood is clearly thicker than water.

We have this very similar family ownership going on here with Jesus. In our text this morning in Mark chapter 3 we see evidence of a shame and honour culture being played out. Jesus as the Son of God is now operating in a ministry that is way outside normal Jewish expectations. It is causing such a stir and strong reactions from the authorities, that Jesus' own family try to take charge of him. They declare him to be 'out of his mind', or mentally ill and so to minimize any further embarrassment and shame they try to remove Jesus.

Scribes who came up from Jerusalem try to diagnose what is wrong with Jesus. Their spiritual diagnosis however is much worse than what the family think. They are deeply uncomfortable about the stories of Jesus driving out demons and so they insult him in the most appalling way. They declare that Jesus has 'Beelzebub' in him. Now this does not just mean they think he is being used by Satan to drive out demons. They believe Jesus has something unclean inside him. And so they used so the word Beelzebub on Jesus. This is a slanderous word the Jews used to call the

Old Testament Canaanite god Ba'al.

'Ba'al zebub' was called 'Lord of the flies or Lord of the exalted' in the Old Testament and was called on to protect the people and crops from insects. So the Jews made a joke with the name and called this god Ba'al zeboul or 'Lord of the dung!' This terrible name is what they call Jesus. In their eyes Jesus is no better than cow manure or a dung heap.

Now Jesus' response to this is strong and effective. As Jesus points out their false logic, Satan's kingdom being divided against itself cannot stand. What's more Jesus uses a parable about a strong man being bound up so that his house can be robbed. Jesus is saying here that he is the one more powerful than Satan. Jesus coming into this world means that he can tie up Satan and take out of his house everything he has stolen from God.

But Jesus' words go up a level when he warns the Jewish scribes about blaspheming against the Holy Spirit as an eternal sin that won't be forgiven. It is a commonly misunderstood bit of Scripture but let me reassure you that as Christians it is near impossible to truly blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. The people who truly blaspheme against the Spirit, have a deeply rooted satanic spirit of hate and disgust. Anything to do with God is felt by these people as dirty, filthy and unclean. That is who Jesus is referring to. You cannot as Christians blaspheme the Spirit by accident or when you are cross with God. Nor are you blaspheming if you simply try to test whether something is from the Holy Spirit or not.

But now we move from this place of rejection to a place of security and safety. Jesus enters a house and it is full of people who love him. They enclose Jesus and form a protective circle around him as he no doubt teaches and eats with them. Before long a message comes through from the outside. *'Lord, your mother and brothers are outside looking for you'*. This is the most interesting moment of the story. Jesus doesn't say: 'Ok, tell them I'll be out in a moment.' He says 'Who are my mother and brothers? Slowly he looks around the circle to each person and says: *'Here is my mother and here are my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.'*

What we are hearing here is a shift from earthly family to spiritual family. This same mother Mary, who was visited by the angel before Jesus was

born has come to a place of not understanding who Jesus really is and what he came for. Is she starting to believe what the Jewish scribes are saying? Perhaps Jesus is too embarrassing and shameful to let loose in the community. But Jesus knows he has been rejected and misunderstood by his family and so Jesus as the Son of God makes the bold claim that ordinary people, the disciples and all those who love and care for Jesus become his spiritual family; he gets a substitute mother, as well as new brothers and sisters. But interestingly during the crucifixion scene in John's Gospel, Jesus gives his mother Mary, a substitute son. *'When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, 'Woman, here is your son'. Then he said to the disciple: 'Here is your mother'. So from that hour he took her into his home'. (John 19:26-27).*

So friends in Christ, when there are new people joining a church or perhaps people coming back after many years, Jesus does the introducing: 'Friends, here is your brother, here is your sister!' But I believe Jesus is saying more to us here. Families are God's circles of care. When Jesus entered the house, he entered the inside of the circle: he was put on the inside. The circle of care surrounded Jesus and protected him. Many families in various houses around the world practice hospitality. They have people round to stay overnight or they might let someone lodge with them for a period of time. Some even become part of the family don't they?

So it is with our church and the wider church family also. We open our doors and hearts to those who want to take refuge in God's circle of care, so that they are not only provided for in terms of their spiritual safety needs, but also they get to be fed with the food of the Gospel. And just in case we might feel anxious and nervous about our established social patterns altering a little because of new-comers, God reminds us like he reminded the Israelites in Deuteronomy 10:19: *For you must show love to strangers for you were once strangers in Egypt'.*

There are a great number of people from many different backgrounds who God wishes to bring into his family. But I think the key to welcoming the stranger into our midst will hinge greatly on our own past experience or memory of ourselves feeling rejected and on the outside. Sadly, some people for different reasons may even feel like strangers in their own family, misunderstood and feeling unclean and unaccepted. Could it be

that such an experience could give a much deeper appreciation of being welcomed into the circle of God's family?

Thankfully there are people who may not have had an experience like this to the same degree, but if that feeling of being different and unaccepted is still strong in your memory, let the Holy Spirit use that to help you put yourself in the mind of a person who is new or different who seeks our help. Remember that Jesus knows what it feels like to be rejected by his own family and taken in by another.

Let us be that family that takes in another person through Christ's love, and not only show an open hearted welcome but also that we maintain that nurture over time; lovingly involving people into deeper layers of fellowship.

But God's hospitality is also shown every Sunday. He gives us a spiritual hot shower as we are forgiven and cleaned in the confession and then he feeds us with his Word and a great meal in Holy Communion to strengthen us.

God's hospitality is not only practiced here at church it is also practiced in our lives, wherever God has put us. We are called to welcome the stranger and operate circles of care at work and in our homes and also through care & share groups. That is where the Gospel can be truly shared effectively; not just through the service on a Sunday, but through us, wherever we are, through the gifts God has given each one of us.

Age or energy hasn't a thing to do with how effective we can be to show love to someone on the outside. Both new and established members of our family not only need brothers and sisters, they also need fathers, mothers and grandmothers and grandfathers. For those who have lost their older family members you may indeed be filling a grandparent sized hole in many people's hearts by loving them.

So let us be that protective and loving circle of care for those that are seeking the refuge of God. Pray about your role in that calling. May God both bless our family, grow our family and equip our family to be a safe and Godly place, in Christ Jesus,

Amen.