

Jesus' vision of radical inclusion

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Mk 3:21-31, 7:10-12, Lk 8:40-56, Jn 19:25-27, 1&2 Timothy

Standing here I am catapulted back to Christ Church, Hamilton in Victoria. It's the First Sunday after Christmas, 1987 and, as a newly ordained Deacon it's my responsibility to preach my first sermon. The parish is observing the day as the Feast of the Holy Family. Nervous? You bet! My training rector, himself trained in Zimbabwe is sitting in his stall, head cocked attentively, and wondering 'Let's see what they teach these young things in Theological College these days!'

As I launch out into the deep—and as things turn out, it is pretty deep water that I'm negotiating—I slowly gain more confidence and then, before I know it, the sermon's over. Said too much, inexperienced preachers always do: a surfeit of information, a deficit of reflection. Service over and disrobing in the vestry, my training rector says to me the words I can still hear today. 'Well, you've just destroyed much of what I'd believed about the Christian notion of family.' That's not good. It's not really what you want to hear from your boss on your first week. I remember saying something like, 'Well, perhaps it might be best if you preach at the 10am because I don't think I can fix it between now and then.' Only to be told, 'Fix it? Who said anything about fixing it? Ach, man, it was great.' Actually I'm not sure it was great – but I am sure that Warrick (for that was his name) was both great and gracious with his callow assistant curate.

Looking at the Christmas Creche it's easy to imagine that the Holy Family is rather like a first century transplant of the modern nuclear family—despite the fact that the latter is

somewhat more fissured and permeable than it was when I first considered this theme thirty years ago. But it's a curious fact that for Christianity the familial is, right from the time Jesus's youth, subjected to a measure of critical scrutiny that can make some of us a bit uncomfortable. Alright, so it can make some of us feel very uncomfortable.

Family can touch us in places that we sometimes don't want to go and many of us can resonate with those well-known sentiments that open the novel *Anna Karenina*: 'All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' So, how did things stand with Jesus and his family?

Let's begin with the gospel and with Luke's story of the journey to Jerusalem. On the return journey to their village Mary and Joseph presume that Jesus is with the group of travellers. Unhappily they are wrong. It takes nothing less than a return journey to Jerusalem and three whole days of searching before they find him: sitting in the Temple. For years we had this encounter softened for us by the delightful cadences of Elizabethan English. 'And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? Behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.' That's code for 'And just what is the meaning of THIS!!'

Is Jesus contrite? Is he Apologetic? Not a bit of it. Instead, he asks them a question, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' That's not really the response that Joseph wants to hear! Of course Luke tells the story not to show Jesus as an adolescent brat, but to illustrate that even at that early age, he was both precocious and conscious of his identity and destiny: Luke is preoccupied with destiny. And Luke makes sure that he rounds out the story on a positive note: 'Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them.' These simple lines form the basis of the idealization of the Holy Family as a nuclear unit.

And yet, this idealized picture will not stand closer scrutiny from the gospels themselves. Jesus' family life was spent in a peasant village surrounded by relatives and neighbours, with very little privacy and strong social pressure toward conformity. The gospel records indicate that he did not conform, and paid the price: rejection and misunderstanding by his extended family.

The earliest narrative of the encounter of the adult Jesus with his family comes from Mk. 3:21 and it is not a happy one. Mark states briefly that in the midst of Jesus' enormous popularity with the crowds, his relatives or those from his home village came to fulfill their familial responsibility by taking hold of him because they thought he was out of his mind. His bizarre behavior—at least as they interpreted it—was shaming their village and they had to do something about it. A little later in Mark's narrative (3:31) his mother and his brothers tried again. They sent word to him through the crowd that they were outside (in contrast to the crowd who are presumably on the *inside* sitting around him). Some in the crowd said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you.'

Family loyalty and hospitality would have suggested an immediate response from him: receiving the family was an expected priority. But instead of this, Jesus replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' Thus he effectively ignores them and says to those who are *inside and around him*, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

It's not without significance that the precursor to this story in Mark, Chapter 3 is Jesus's appointment of the twelve apostles whose 'insider' status is contrasted sharply with that of his blood relatives, to the detriment of the latter. Indeed so much so that at this point in the narrative the family of Jesus exit the stage and are never seen again, in spite of the fact that they are known to others later in the

story.

In the gospel traditions it is interesting that there are *no positive* sayings about the goodness of the family that were preserved or attributed to Jesus. Instead, Jesus is portrayed as being sensitive to and taking an interest in the families of others, but at best seems to stand aloof from his own. While Jesus is portrayed as appreciative of religious requirements regarding the family (Mk. 7:10-12 about honoring one's parents), and sensitive to the needs of and longing for family life in an environment harsh toward the marginalized (Lk. 8:40-56 the healing of the centurion's daughter), his attitude toward his own family was hardly one characterized by enthusiasm: something we see from today's gospel and also from the section in Mark Chapter three. A primary and conspicuous exception to this is one portrayal of his death (Jn. 19:25-27 where Jesus commits his mother into the care of the beloved disciple).

It has been suggested that the vision of the earliest Christians, if not of Jesus himself, was to play down the importance of blood relationships in favour of those based upon spirit. Spirit and belief rather than blood would henceforth become the mark of radical inclusion. Those, who to use the words of the Markan Jesus, 'do the will of God' would become 'my brother and sister and mother.' So, did this radical vision of inclusion actually *work*?

Well, it sort of worked. It's true that in Jesus' disavowal of the family, that the seeds of a new version of family were made possible, but the ideal proved itself impossible of achievement and there was great resistance against it. Consider for example, the Pastoral Letters of 1 and 2 Timothy, to say nothing of the Household Codes from Colossians 3, Ephesians 5 and the First Letter of Peter. These are the sections in which the respective obligations of wives to husbands and children to parents are spelled out. Indeed it is these latter that are sometimes appealed to by advocates of

the 'family values' lobby. But as you see, the picture, as always, is more complex and nuanced than one simple or simplistic view.

But the vision did work inasmuch as it called differing people together into one place and for a common purpose. People of differing ages, social status, ethnicity, background, abilities and so much more were and continue to be drawn together throughout time and place. Look around you; look at the person next to you, and ask yourself: would I have met you, perhaps have come to know you, even formed a deep friendship with you, had it not been for the fact that we have been drawn together into one place—this place—for a common purpose. And if your answer to that question is: 'Well, it's unlikely,' then I think we can say that Jesus' vision of radical inclusion is still quietly alive. That the call is insistent (as the Collect expresses it) is something with which we can readily agree. That it is more insistent than ties of family or blood is something on which the various voices of the New Testament never reaches consensus and therefore it is something through the midst of which each of us must trace his or her own path.