

Message for Mother's Day and Christian Family Sunday

May 10, 2020

1 Corinthians 13

Today is Mother's Day and what a strange one it is. Instead of getting together with our families, so many of us are separated from our loved ones because of the need for social distancing. Today however isn't just Mother's Day; some time ago the church took Mother's Day one step further and made it into Christian Family Sunday as well. Today then isn't just a day for remembering our mothers and, if possible, letting them know how special they are, today is also an occasion for celebrating the wonderful gift of all the other members of our families.

Families; they can be such a wonderful source of love, understanding and support and yet sometimes they can also be a source of pain and heartache as well. Truly as a person once said, sometimes we will say and do hurtful things to members of our families that we would never do to a stranger. Sadly, all too often perhaps, it is the stranger who sees us at our best while our nearest and dearest sees us at our worst. With all of this in mind as I thought about what to say this week, I found myself thinking about what is perhaps the best known and yet, oddly enough, one of the least known families of the entire Bible; that of Jesus.

"Conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary" as the Apostle's Creed phrases it, Jesus was brought up in the small village of Nazareth in Galilee. His 'father' Joseph was a carpenter but while we often think of carpenters in terms of building houses and such, that is probably not what Joseph did. At that time and place wood was scarce and far too valuable to be used as a basic building material. Carpenters then were what we today would call woodworkers, making things like furniture, farm implements and the like. The Bible tells us that Jesus too was a carpenter following in his father's footsteps; this is what the eldest son usually did. We do not know when Joseph died though it was most certainly before

Jesus began his ministry. Likewise we do not know what Jesus' relationship with Joseph was like but the Bible does provide us with a clue.

One of Jesus' most basic teachings is that we can think of God as being like a father; we can for example think of the first line of the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father who art in Heaven." The word which we translate as father in Aramaic, which was Jesus' mother tongue, is the word 'abba'. The word 'abba' however is better translated 'daddy'. When we say the Lord's Prayer then we are, without realizing it, referring to God as our daddy with all that that implies. Now, would Jesus have ever said and taught this if he hadn't thought of Joseph in these terms? Possibly but not likely; indeed many scholars speculate that Jesus' imagery for his heavenly father reflects his relationship with his earthly one. Yet while Jesus probably had a positive relationship with his father, his relationship with his siblings was less than ideal.

The Bible tells us that Jesus had four brothers, James, Joses (or Joseph), Judas and Simon. He also had sisters as well but their names are not recorded. Now was Mary the biological mother of James and the others? Whether or not James and the others were Jesus' half-siblings or step-siblings is something that has long been the subject of passionate debate. This debate over the exact relationship between Jesus and his brothers and sisters has gone on for centuries but at the end of the day? Perhaps it doesn't really matter. It doesn't because functionally speaking, Jesus and his siblings were members of the same family.

We do not know what the early years were like but once Jesus began his ministry, tensions arose. There are several references to this strained relationship. Mark tells us for example that one day while Jesus was teaching, his family showed up and wanted to take him home because, as they said, "He is out of his mind." Jesus' response was to ask "Who are my mother and brothers?" Then, looking at those listening to him he said "Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." In his gospel John explicitly states that "... even his own brothers did not believe in him". In fact this family tension may well be reflected in Jesus' teaching.

One day Jesus warned his followers that far from bringing about family peace and unity, he and his teaching could and even would be a source of strife:

“For I have come to turn
a man against his father
a daughter against her mother
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law –
a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.”

Not a usual scripture passage to be referred to on Mother’s Day and Christian Family Sunday! Seriously, many scholars speculate that Jesus saying this was not just a prediction of what impact his ministry could and even would have on families in the future, it also reflected the impact of his ministry on his own family at that time. Perhaps the greatest indication of Jesus’ family’s tensions is to be found in his last moments on the cross.

In that society at that time, the eldest son normally assumed responsibility for his mother when his father died. After Joseph’s death then, the responsibility for looking after Mary would have fallen on Jesus’ shoulders. If however Jesus could no longer fulfill that responsibility, then it would normally have become James’ since he was the next oldest son. While on the cross though, Jesus saw both his mother and the unnamed disciple whom he loved standing nearby. “Woman, here is your son” he said. Then, addressing the disciple, he said “Here is your mother”. This is striking. One of Jesus’ last acts before his death was to entrust his mother’s care to one of his disciples rather than his own brother! Truly the story of Jesus’ family life does not appear to be a happy one so why am I talking about this on today of all days? Simply because of what happened next.

In the Book of Acts, when Luke described the time between Jesus’ resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, he wrote: “They had all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.”

Also, when writing about the importance of Jesus' resurrection in First Corinthians, Paul included a list of those whom Jesus had appeared to and that list includes his brother James. Despite all of the pain, heartache and negativity experienced during the course of his ministry, there was reconciliation. After that James, nicknamed 'James the Just', went on to become not only the leader of the church in Jerusalem but also one of the most respected leaders of the entire church. James in fact was eventually martyred because of his faith in his brother. In the end faith, forgiveness, love and reconciliation prevailed and that is the message and the promise of Jesus' family.

At the best of times it is not always easy being family and this is most certainly neither the best nor the easiest of times. So many families today are coping with economic hardship and uncertainty, struggling to put food on the table never mind paying the rest of the bills. Social distancing is leading to stress, both physically and mentally. The need for social distancing is making things even harder for those who are worried about loved ones, especially perhaps if they are on the front lines or in a nursing home. For other people though the problem is not the isolation, rather it is the exact opposite. Far from being isolated, there is too much togetherness being with one's partner and children all of the time with no break. Yes, so many families are under more stress today than ever before but even so, on this Mother's Day and Christian Family Sunday, we still affirm the ideals that we strive for; that we will try our best to love, care, protect, understand and forgive the significant others in our lives.

In fact our ideal is to be found in today's scripture reading, First Corinthians 13. In the place of the word 'love' we can substitute our own name and if we do so then we have our ideal.

- _____ is patient.
- _____ is kind.
- _____ does not envy.
- _____ does not boast.
- _____ is not proud.
- _____ does not dishonour others.

_____ is not self-seeking.
_____ is not easily angered.
_____ keeps no record of wrongs.
_____ does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
_____ always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always
perseveres.
_____ never fails.

This is the great ideal that we affirm and strive for on this Mother's Day and Christian Family Sunday. And the great promise is that even when we fail to love the significant others in our lives as they deserve to be loved, we have the example and promise of Jesus' family; that in the end, love, peace and reconciliation will prevail.