
Hymns: **55** “Immortal, invisible, God only wise”
 611 “Brother, sister, let me serve you”
 440 “Amazing grace”
 503 “Love divine, all loves excelling”

Reading: **Mark 3: 20-35**

“HAPPY FAMILIES”

Before we get into the meat of this morning’s sermon, I have to recognise two important groups of people who are present with us. First of all, our very own football champions – Nathan, Lloyd, Damon, Kevin, Michael and Joshua. They won they won the Junior Boys’ Brigade shield in a competition they ran away with just a couple of days ago. They represent Wesley’s Chapel’s antidote to everything that’s been happening in the football world centred in Zurich in recent days. Their message is a simple one – **Football Is Fun Actually**. So congratulations to them.

And we must also recognise the presence of 250 young people from the State of Oklahoma. When I woke up this morning and looked out onto a perfect summer’s day about to begin, my heart felt lifted up and in the words of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s famous show I sang out loud:

*There’s a bright golden haze on the morning
There’s a bright golden haze on the morning
Our spirits fly high
In the wink of an eye
And they seem to be climbing clear up to the sky.*

*Oh what a beautiful morning
Oh what a beautiful day
I’ve got a wonderful feeling
Everything’s going our way.*

So let Oklahoma speak. I’ve never been there but will be able to look across towards the promise land from Wichita Falls in Northern Texas when I visit there next spring like Moses from Mount Nebo.

All this by way of introduction to this morning's theme.

The Roman Catholic Church is very divided at the moment as it prepares for the second part of a Synod which began last October and is to be completed later this year. Huge divisions of opinion are opening up. The two major camps are centred around the following positions:

- The Church cannot accept gay unions as comparable to marriage but stable ones should be recognised as a force for good.
- A discussion of this matter [homosexuality] is forbidden for formal reasons because the family is a relationship between a man and a woman – exclusively and indissolubly.

The discussion of all this will prove critical and the recent popular vote by the people of Ireland in favour of same sex marriage (called “a defiance of God” by one leading Roman Catholic cleric) will certainly help to stimulate a lively debate. The leader in yesterday's *Tablet* – a Catholic weekly newspaper, was entitled “Law Versus Love”. And the whole of this discussion centres on the nature of the family.

We've just recognised the 80th birthday of one of our elder statesmen – John Offeh has been a distinguished leader of opinion and fighter for social justice during his professional life. He was called to the Bar in 1969 and, among other things, he has specialised in family law. He and I together can testify to the way in which the word “family” has changed its connotations and its shape in the years since we began our professional lives. The idea of the family changed and developed rapidly during these years. Consider:

- People like me and Margaret married for 46 years with our three kids, – would have considered our understanding and experience of family to be the norm.
- But there are so many relationships that break down; with so many second (and third) marriages; sometimes there are children from each or all of these caught up with each other in complicated familial relationships.
- Lone parenting is a much more common feature of the contemporary landscape. Sometimes it's deliberate, often it's the consequence of a breakdown in a relationship.
- Throw into this mix the arrival of surrogate children and you'll see other nuances emerging. Some women bear children for other women, new medical discoveries make it possible for women who previously were considered to be

past the age of producing children to give birth, and (hey presto!) yet other contours appear in this scene.

- Then, of course, we come to the matter of same sex unions. These may be blessed with children or not but they certainly stretch our definitions of family well beyond what I called earlier “the norm”. And here I feel I must honour the presence of gay members of our congregation, some in stable partnerships, who are loyal and committed to our cause/
- And we must mention before closing this list the grim fact that domestic violence and child abuse are more prevalent within families than beyond them.

All this leads to two possible ways of posing the question:

- Which of the patterns I’ve just listed is in accordance with God’s law?
- What of God (how can God) can be found in each of these?

All this has emerged from my reading of this morning’s passage. Do we approach various forms of trusting and reciprocal relationships, the various shapes of what we might call “family” in contemporary society, intending to measure them against an unchanging benchmark or intent on discovering how God can be found within them? But let’s turn to the passage at the heart of this morning’s service.

Jesus didn’t marry. He doesn’t seem to have contemplated marriage. There’ll be no grandchildren for his mother Mary. Nor nephews or nieces for his brothers and sisters. He opts for a peripatetic life with no fixed abode.

In this passage he makes a rare visit home. We’re not told of many such visits throughout the records available to us. At this particular moment, he’s at the height of his popularity. People come to him from all hands. His family, meanwhile, simply don’t understand what’s happening. They hear voices suggesting he’s mad yet they can see that he’s doing good. They must have wondered more than once why he couldn’t be just a normal, home-loving, Jewish boy. They get so uptight about the situation that they go out “to restrain him”. That verb “to restrain” suggests that they might have suspected the accusations of madness to have had some truth in them. Happy families?

It all reminds me of that verse of poetry written by Philip Larkin:

*They mess you up your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra just for you.*

That's a slightly sanitised version of the original – but the point is well made. Mary had, of course, been given due warning that things might turn out strangely for her son. Right at the beginning we're told that she should expect a sword to pierce her heart. But it must have been hard for her all the same. "Devil possessed" that's what some people were saying about him.

It can be tough for parents as their children grow up with their own ideas, when they don't conform to the old ways, when they strike out on their own. As I look at this incident, I just can't draw from it any of the bourgeois, stodgy, stuffy, static formulations about family life that the Church has been so fond of down the years. The experience of Jesus in his family speaks of something altogether more fissiparous and touchy and unpredictable.

As I look at my own children – all in happy and sustaining relationships – NOW!! I can remember the sometimes difficult path we've had to tread to get to this point. One of our children has never been back to this church since a (visiting) preacher denounced all people living in co-habitation with others as sinners in need of repentance. It was, said the preacher, dirty and sinful. Besides that, two of our three children have endured broken marriages with all the heartbreak that that brings. And it's caused me to ask what do parents, Christian parents, do (besides pulling their hair out, worrying themselves to death)? We've discovered that there's only one real option. You have to go on loving your kids. Even if that means revising some of the presuppositions that had previously undergirded your understanding of the way families ought to work.

But the most radical aspect in this biblical episode is the response of Jesus when they told him that his mum had turned up with the other kids. This message was intended to put pressure on him, to suggest that he should behave himself, to calm down, and to act in a way that would please and relieve them. But his response to all this is truly radical. Let his reply echo down the ages.

"Your mum, your brothers and sisters, - they're all here," they announced.

"Who are my mother and my brothers and sisters?" He replied.

And then, looking round the crowd, in one fell swoop, he introduces an entirely new idea as to the scope of what might constitute a true idea of family. With a wave of his arm, indicating the whole crowd in front of him and around him, he answered:

“Here are my mother, my brothers, my sisters. Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, my mother.”

Wow! He doesn't for a moment dismiss the idea of the importance of his biological family. Indeed, his mother was to catch up with his thinking as the story of his life unfolded. And she was with him to the bitter end. But he certainly did extend and enrich conventional ideas about the family. It's not merely a biological matter at all. A true and constructive view of the family envisages the grouping of like-minded people, locked in solidarity with each other, in service of the God who made them all. Now that's something to be playing with. This understanding would certainly affect the way we approach the question of the family.

So our Roman Catholic friends, who first of all in their translation of the Bible, obliterated the brothers and sisters of Jesus, and subsequently turned them into cousins (a true act of transubstantiation) – all to protect the virginity of Mary and the identity of Jesus as truly the Son of God, - must now accept something altogether more challenging in the way they seek to respond pastorally to all those situations in our contemporary world where people are working hard at building and maintaining relationships. And the challenge doesn't only come from the changing world of which so many Christians are so critical. It comes too from the Bible.

Amen.