

Sunday 9 June 2024 - Jesus and Family Values – Michael Bayley

We hear a great deal these days about the importance of family values. Michael Bayley explores the challenging things that Jesus has to say about them.

Readings:

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1. Mark 3:20-end.

Sermon: Jesus and Family Values – Michael Bayley

The passage in the Gospel from Mark about Jesus and his family may seem shocking. ‘Jesus’s mother and his brothers (came to the house where Jesus was) and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And the crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him: “Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking around on those who set about him, he said: “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother’ (Mark 3:31–35). How did Jesus’s mother and brothers feel about that?

This is not as extreme as what Jesus says in Luke 14: ‘Now great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple”’ (14:25 – 26).

By modern Western standards, Jesus does not uphold ‘traditional family values’. For us, our instinctive response is that family an unquestionable good thing in life. It is the core of so much that is good and sound and reliable and trustworthy and in which so much of our sense of self value and self-identity is grounded. So why does Jesus put a big question mark against this, or at the very least indicate that this is not the whole story?

Jesus does not dismiss the family as unimportant. Look at his very firm views on marriage. ‘A man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife and two shall become one. So there are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no one put asunder’ (Matthew 19:5 – 6). He is clear that we have to honour our father and a mother (Matthew 15:4). His concern for children is evident. He attends with care to an official with a sick son (John 4:46 – 53), another with a dying daughter (Matthew 9:18 – 26), the widow at Nain (Luke 7:11 – 17), the father of a possessed boy (Mark 9:14 – 28), and a woman with a sick daughter (Matthew 15:21 – 28). This was not a cultural norm of the time. Children in the ancient world were extremely vulnerable, viewed as unfinished persons, subject to abuse and submission. Jesus upholds children as models of faith and as examples of what is necessary to enter the kingdom is subversive (Luke 9:48; Mark 9:26 – 27; Matthew 18:1 – 5). Perhaps most eloquent is Jesus’ concern on the cross to see that his mother is cared for.

Jesus himself has a complex family situation. His relationship with his mother is, at times, tense. They had sharp exchanges when as a child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem and left his parents wondering where on earth he had got to. The exchange between him and his mother of the marriage in Cana of Galilee had a sharp edge to it. The passage we had from Saint Mark as the gospel suggests that his mother and brothers were really worried about him and wondered what on earth he was doing with his life. It is not difficult to imagine why they might be concerned. Instead of a safe, sound responsible life with a safe job as a carpenter, he was becoming a scruffy, disreputable itinerant preacher. Indeed some of his friends were so worried about it that: ‘They went out to seize him, for they said, ‘He is beside himself”’ (Mark 3:20).

Jenn Strawbridge, in an article from which I have already been quoting in this sermon, puts her finger on the key issue.¹ She writes: ‘We could argue that Jesus has two families in the Gospels – one with Joseph, Mary and his siblings and one with his disciples – and that Jesus’ the most difficult statements about family stems from this tension.’ Strawbridge continues: ‘Within the Gospels, those called to be disciples also appear to be called to imitate Jesus’s own separation from his family. A relationship with Jesus will bring division at the heart of family relationships. Jesus frequently calls his disciples away from their families to follow him and separation from family is a central aspect of discipleship. They must, Jesus says, love him more than family. “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it and he who loses his life for my sake will find. it” (Matthew 11:37 – 39)’.

Note that in this passage Jesus does not say that we must not love our parents or children but that we have to love him more. But equally there is no denying that this is a hard saying. Jesus does not call us to a casual friendship when we feel like it. He calls us to follow him with all our heart, with all our mind, with all of our soul and with all our strength. It is good to be reminded sometimes, alarming as it may be, that Jesus demands our total commitment – all our lives not just the easy bits.

When I started writing this sermon I found myself thinking: surely this isn’t quite as tough as it sounds. Yet it is. Jesus does not deny that the family is profoundly important, but our devotion to our family is subject to our devotion to our Lord as much as any other aspect of our lives. Jesus says quite clearly: ‘Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother’ (Mark 3:35).

I think there is an important parallel. Historically, and still to a considerable extent today, the family can be a means of oppression, a way of preventing people from doing what they feel they are called to do. This has applied especially to women. Consider, for example, the struggle that Florence Nightingale had, but at a less dramatic level, countless women, and no doubt some men, have had to fight free from family ties to lead fulfilling lives.

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¹ Jenn Strawbridge, ‘Jesus and Family in the Gospels’ - https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/fhc_theology-insights_jenn-sawbridge.pdf.