

MARK 3 v20-21, 32-35

Christianity is associated in many people's minds with 'family values'. Whereas Churches in Britain that issue statements on poverty or nuclear weapons are told to 'stay out of politics', but there is an expectation that they will make comments about marriage and the family. Family life is seen almost as the churches' main remit. So what better day to consider the matter than this mothers' day.

*A crowd was sitting around Jesus, and they said to him, "Look, your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, and they want you." Jesus answered, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" He looked at the people sitting around him and said, "Look! Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does what God wants is my brother, my sister, my mother."*

From this passage, you might think that Jesus didn't rate his biological family at all. "This passage from Mark's Gospel is not the only one in which Jesus seems distinctly unenthusiastic about his biological family. A variation appears in Matthew and Luke. In John's Gospel, we see Jesus speaking rather rudely to his mother when she asks him to help out with the wine at a family wedding. He doesn't seem much more positive about her in another story in Luke Chapter 11, a woman spoke up from the crowd and said to him, "How happy is the woman who bore you and nursed you!"

But Jesus answered, "Rather, how happy are those who hear the word of God and obey it!"

Why was Jesus so negative when his mother and his brothers asked to see him? On one level, Jesus sounds like a petulant young man who would rather be with his mates than with his parents. I hope that there is more to it than this. Mark tells us that people were saying he's gone mad' Is this what his family thought? The gospels suggest that accusations of madness were made against Jesus several times, though more often by his religious and political opponents than by his relatives.

Were Jesus' mother and brothers as hostile to him as he was to them? Were they motivated by a desire to protect him? With Jesus being the family's eldest son, he may have been expected to take over as head of the family and fulfill domestic responsibilities, not take off for the life of a travelling activist. so, Jesus' refusal to be contained is likely to have fuelled family conflict.

There is a suggestion that Mary believed that Jesus was destined for high things - but that he didn't share her understanding of what that meant. If your mother believes you're the messiah, this takes parental pressure to new levels!-Preaching controversial messages to crowds is a dangerous business under an oppressive regime such as the Roman Empire. The family may well have feared that Jesus' actions would land them all in prison, or worse.

It is hard enough to understand complex dynamics in family relationships at the best of times, let alone when trying to analyse a family who lived nearly two thousand years ago. Nonetheless, Jesus' comments give us some clues as to what he was thinking - and to what relevance this has for families and individuals today.

Jesus says that anyone who does the will of God is his 'brother and sister and mother'. The gospels give the impression that Jesus travelled around with his friends and followers while he was preaching and teaching. His travelling companions seem to have included women as well as men, of different ages and possibly of varied social backgrounds. Some clearly left their families and homes to follow him. This would be seen as a neglect of responsibility. To those wedded to social norms, this behaviour would have seemed all the more shocking because of the mixture of genders, ages and social backgrounds in this relatively egalitarian grouping: they are all each other's brother and sister and mother. They are not, however, each other's father. The word 'father' carried a rather different meaning in Jesus' culture than in our own. A family was led - indeed, it was almost owned - by its father. Wives and children were to a large extent the property of the male head of the family. Rich fathers obviously had more power than poor fathers, but even a poor father was in a socially superior position to his wife and children. The Roman Emperor was described as the 'father' of everyone in the empire.

The father is the one in charge. Jesus used the title for God alone. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is quoted as saying, 'Call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father.' This was a potentially subversive statement in a society built on family structures, to say nothing of depriving the emperor of one of his titles. The New Testament scholar Deirdre Good points out that Matthew in particular seems to have avoided the use of the word 'father' whenever possible. Scholars of Mark's Gospel have also commented on its resistance to authority and traditional structures. This fits in with the idea of a community of equals for whom God is the only father and lord.

The well-known anti-religious writer Richard Dawkins accuses Jesus of having a 'dodgy' attitude to families. He criticises him for being rude to his mother and encouraging people to leave family behind (although he describes some of his other ethical teachings as 'admirable'). Despite Dawkins' supposed radicalism, it seems that his main objection to Jesus lies in Jesus' failure to uphold respectable family values.

All this raises questions about the 'family values' preaching heard in many churches. How can 'family values' be connected to Jesus' teaching?

There is an argument that Jesus was not negative about families, but only about families as they were structured in his own culture. Some say that he was hostile to hierarchy and sexism, rather than to biological families as such.

Families in the West today are rather different to those in Palestine two thousand years ago. For one thing, nuclear families were largely unknown in that culture, in which extended family ties tended to be much stronger. Some suggest that Jesus would be less negative about families in our society than those in his own. The implication is that families today are less hierarchical and that marriage is more equal. There is an element of truth in this claim, though there is a danger of smugness in thinking our own culture is superior. In the UK today, domestic violence is still rife and most sexual abuse takes place within the family. Even in happier families, there is often pressure to conform to parental expectations. You have only to watch a few romantic comedies to see how much we are expected to live up to a romantic ideal: singleness is presented as something to be overcome, ex-partners can apparently never be friends, it is assumed that all couples want to have children and gay and bisexual people usually appear only as marginal characters. Some common phrases in our society serve to illustrate these narrow attitudes. People who are close to each other without romance or sex are described as 'just friends'. Why is friendship denigrated with the word 'just'? Were Jesus and those with whom he was speaking in this passage 'just friends'? Politicians like to say that they are supporting 'hard-working families'. Not only is this rather offensive to those who can't work (or can't find work), but it also defines people by their families. What about hard-working single people?

Was Jesus' attitude any more inclusive?

It perhaps depends on how we understand Jesus' statement about 'anyone who does the will of God'. Some read this as meaning those who believe in Jesus but, in this passage at least, he did not mention belief. Is it those who do as Jesus wishes? It should be noted that the gospels often portray Jesus' closest disciples as not doing what he wishes, but he did not abandon them. They may have been there in the circle when the message was brought in from his mother and brothers. Doing 'the will of God' could be about living ethically and lovingly rather than sharing beliefs, but is this still too narrow - or too broad? It can be argued that the boundary of doing 'God's will' was a deliberately ambiguous one.

In this passage, Jesus declares a new understanding of family at the same time as he turns away from the old one. To reject biological family is not to reject family but rather to re-make it. Perhaps Jesus was a family man after all.