

## *Practicing Radical Hospitality: Mark 3:20-35*

June 7th 2015.

How wonderful it is for us to celebrate the gift in the form of Sophie Isla, to Florence, Tony and Luke, to the Christ Church Family. It is a privilege to be invited to be part of this service. Thanks to Susan for welcoming us. It is always a joy to be back at Christ Church, we need our regular fix of Christ Church for the life in wilderness!!!

Baptism is an occasion to remind ourselves the gift of God to humanity in the form of Jesus Christ, how we are loved and cared for within the community of God's children. As we witnessed in the liturgy, the rituals, symbols and words they all point us to the necessity of collective responsibility. It is not just the individuals responsibility to be a better follower of Christ, but it is equally expected of the parents, the godparents and the church family to ensure that every baby and adult who is baptised are given the right environment for them to flourish in God! Be a living witness to God!! This is a tall claim. I hope you all realise that and not just repeated the words printed in the order of service. What makes Christianity work is that mutual commitment and care for one another. Even more, what makes Christianity effective is embracing and involving others, strangers and everyone into the very fabric of church life. Christ Church is a wonderful example and we are all witnesses to it. But there is always room for improvement! It is also not that easy!! Families are difficult; managing them is even more complicated. To satisfy everybody's desire to be in control could land us in trouble!!

If we carefully read the gospel passage, Jesus during his earthly ministry tried very hard to deal with these issues. It looks like Jesus had a troubled relationship with his mother and siblings! There is a bit of tension in their conversation!! It is obvious there was a family discord. In Mark 3:21, which says: "When his family heard what was happening, they came to take control of him. They were saying, 'He's out of his mind!'" (translation: Common English Bible). Yet, Christian tradition has had a difficult time reckoning with the perhaps troubling idea of family strife between Jesus and his siblings. If you look at various translations they either omitted it or tried to paint much nicer picture!

Mark sets Jesus' family in comparison to influential religious leaders (legal scholars based in Jerusalem). Both groups express an inability to understand who Jesus really was. The religious authorities conclude he is possessed by Satan. His family assumes he has lost his sanity. In an ancient setting, these diagnoses were roughly equivalent to each other. What this points to is the inability of both groups to see him as God's agent. His family and religious insiders were bewildered by what Jesus proposed, God's intentions for human flourishing, which threatened to disrupt so many aspects of human society, values and norms. When the crowd says that his family is summoning him from outside the crowded building, Jesus answers with a shocking statement: "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? ... Look, here [these people seated around me] are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does God's will is my brother, sister and mother." It's good news for those inside the house, who seek to identify with Jesus and his message. It's also good news for Mark's earliest readers who found themselves estranged from their biological families (compare Mark 10:28-30). Bad news, however, for his relatives on the outside, and for others with high regard for customary notions of honour and social stability. Jesus redefines the criteria for who constitutes his true family. Jesus speaks to deeply embedded cultural assumptions when he determines his true family not by blood relations or kinship ties but by doing the will of God. For Jesus, family, at least, one type of family, is a community of people joined as an expression of their commitment to discover and manifest God's will. Jesus did not abolish the idea of family or household. But he does consistently unsettle and sometimes redirect those values.

Jesus' words prompt us to consider the relationship between a family and what it means to know and do God's will. The question before us is, can only certain kinds of families reflect or promote God's will, as Jesus articulated it in terms of mercy, love, justice, protection, holiness and well-being? Can only certain families express the belonging and solidarity that God desires to share with humanity?

The other strand of thought in this passage is Jesus' vision of the coming kingdom of God. It was rooted in a profound inclusivity that would let neither religious law nor social custom prevent him from reaching those in need with the abundant life he came to offer. Jesus offered unimaginably gracious hospitality and expectedly wide welcome! As we saw earlier such an attitude would certainly encounter flack! He was declared to be insane!

We all give importance to hospitality in our churches! But often most of us think of hospitality, what we usually mean (or at least communicate through word and deed) is that hospitality is being patient and gracious with new people until they learn the way we do things. But Jesus offers another vision of hospitality that is about meeting people where they are, accepting any and all who are interested in God's kingdom, and responding to need no matter who is asking or when or how they ask.

We live in a society which is plagued by insecurity. Immigrants, migrants, terrorists and so on... We have also alienated ourselves from God, each other, creation, and even ourselves. One way to keep our insecurity under control is to create rules and laws to define ourselves and our neighbours. So that we could judge them either to allow them into our fold or not. religious and social norms play a key role in this process.

We see a similar story being played out in the Gospel reading! Different groups-the crowds, the religious authorities, even Jesus' own family-are judging him against predetermined socially and religiously agreed upon norms. When we see someone who doesn't conform, we call them rebels, or radicals, or unnatural, or immoral. Jesus by questioning these norms and offering a new vision of hospitality unsettles the status-quo. The love of God we see revealed in Jesus knows no boundaries and respects no laws that would keep that love from being shared with everyone.

So if our church is authentic follower of Christ, people should be calling us insane or demon possessed! That's what they called Jesus. If not we may have to ask the question why aren't we getting those comments? Aren't we pushing the boundaries of what's socially and religiously acceptable in order to reach more people with the always surprising, often upsetting, unimaginably gracious, and ridiculously inclusive love of Jesus? And if that is the kind of love we want to offer, we might go on to ask whether we are communicating that message in word and deed loudly and clearly, both inside our doors and outside in the community as well.

Dear Friends, so the challenge for us is to think how each one of us could contribute to the common Christian life that might help us become more welcoming and more hospitable, not just inviting people to join us but even to change ourselves through their presence and gifts.

May God enable us to be the family that does God's will and practices radical hospitality. Amen.

*Anderson H M Jeremiah*