

**THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST - 18<sup>th</sup> August 2013 at Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle 7.00am Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am Solemn Eucharist Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-59**

How do you respond to the words of Jesus in today's Gospel? Don't anyone think I've come to bring peace on earth. Get that idea out of your head. I've come to set things on fire, to burn up the status quo, to disrupt present arrangements. I've even come to disturb your family. If you're serious about following me there's going to be division and family crisis: mothers against daughters; daughter-in-law against mothers-in-law.

Now what's going on here? Is Jesus having a bad day?

A letter was written from a parent to a government official. The letter complained that his once obedient and well-intentioned son had become involved in some weird religious group. The group had overtaken his life. He'd forsaken all his friends and turned against his family. This parent pleaded with the government official to intervene and take action against this group which was causing so much disruption and difficulty in the family.

What was that letter about? A kid who'd gotten mixed up with some weird religious cult like the Moonies? No. It was from a parent in third century Rome complaining about a new and strange sect called Christians.

One of the main criticisms leveled at Christians in Rome was that they were anti-family. Children and women were considered by these subversives to be human. And children were turning against their parents and wives were disobeying their husbands. The most sacred institution in imperial Rome was the family. The family determined your position in society and your economic status and your political influence. Romans would do anything for their families. And they saw the church as a subversive group that posed a threat to the family.

It's the same in the Old Testament. Look through the OT and you find the family was of great importance, especially in the context of the people of Israel. What kinds of families do we find there? Well, you have Abraham journeying with his family and lying to King Abimelech, saying Sarah's his sister not his wife: lying to save his own skin and not caring a fig whether the King sleeps with her or not.

You have Jacob cheating Esau out of his birthright resulting in a long and bitter family feud. You have David committing adultery and murder and giving instructions on his deathbed about how his enemies are to be done in. These are the patriarchs of Israel! You can read about them in the Bible.

Read the book of Ruth - its treatment of the family is strange to say the least. What about the Song of Songs? Nothing about the family in there; it's unbridled, raw, passionate sex! If you don't believe me read it. And if you're too embarrassed, cover your eyes while you read it! The Bible is full of what we might call "dysfunctional families."

What about the New Testament? Well very little is said in the Gospels about Jesus' family. Only Luke mentions one incident about Jesus' childhood. The other Gospels appear to know nothing. But when Jesus is grown, his family is mentioned in a negative and rather unflattering way. Jesus makes it quite clear that his family isn't made up of his biological brothers, sisters and mother. Then he proceeds to travel throughout Galilee asking people to leave their families and to follow him.

Jesus himself had no family responsibilities. When he tells disciples to join him they leave their fishing nets and their father in the boat. When a would-be disciple wants to go and farewell his family, Jesus tells him to forget it.

Was Jesus anti-family? What about passages like Ephesians 5? Good point. After talking about the mutual responsibilities of wives and husbands, Paul ends up by saying that all this is mainly related to the relationship between Christ and his Church!

Why is all this so? Because your human family is not enough to make you a disciple of Jesus. And we're spending this year in Luke's Gospel which places a big emphasis on discipleship. Anything that hinders discipleship has to go. Last Sunday it was possessions. Today, it's family ties. This is radical stuff. And you may not like this sermon. I certainly don't. Texts like these are confronting. They force us to struggle and wrestle and grapple with the tough choices of discipleship, of seriously following Jesus.

The Church is a distinct community. So the Church takes you out of your family, adopts you, and baptises you. You then become part of a newer, bigger, more expansive family called "Church." That's why you call people who are strangers 'brother' and 'sister'. You join this family, not through natural generation, but through spiritual regeneration: conversion, transformation, renewal, baptism.

This new "family" knows no social, economic, racial or political boundaries. Your brothers and sisters are not only local. They also live in Jerusalem, Rome, London, Nairobi, Cairo, Brasilia, Moscow and New York. You have ancestors with names like Mary, Peter, Paul, Ignatius, Catherine, Clement, Joan of Arc, Athanasius, Jerome, Wesley, Cranmer, Thérèse, George. They're called saints, martyrs, confessors, doctors, heroes. Like our earthly ancestors they show us the way. And also like our earthly ancestors they had flaws and made mistakes.

Now is all this bad news for the family? It depends on where you are standing. If you're standing in the shoes of the man in a psychiatrist's office who's almost worked himself to death to provide that elusive 'better life' for his family, then this is bad news. Because, as the psychiatrist said, "Many of us have transferred our basic selfishness off ourselves and onto our children. If we strive and work to feather our own nest, that is self-evidently bad. But if we say that we're doing it for the family, then who would criticise? When we're helping our families, we are still busy helping ourselves." So this is bad news for those whose self-centredness takes the form of an idolatrous exaltation of the family.

On the other hand, if you're standing in the shoes of the girl whose father has consistently abused her sexually since childhood, and ends up in a string of abusive relationships and addicted to alcohol and drugs, then this is good news. It's good news for someone whose family has caused nothing but heartache to know that God has something else in mind.

You see, the interesting thing about the gospel is that what sounds like good news to someone sounds like bad news for someone else. It all depends on where you're standing. The gospel was bad news for the Pharisees and good news for the outcasts. In our culture, where we are experiencing the complete breakdown of the family, God may be giving us a marvellous opportunity to proclaim the gospel. That doesn't mean making public pronouncements decrying the breakdown of the family, and thundering against the forces and influences that undermine the family, and electing politicians who champion something called "family values."

We proclaim the gospel – good news for the family – by adopting people of all different ages into the family of God. To do that we have to incarnate, to demonstrate, to model, to *be* that family. This family, the Church, you and me, is the answer to what's wrong with the world. That's a huge responsibility.

We receive encouragement and hope and renewed strength at this family table. Family meals are occasions when stories are told from the family's history and life together. We, the Church, have our stories. They're contained in readings from Scripture, in hymns, Psalms, Creeds, prayers. They're familiar, like stories told and re-told around the meal table. But we never tire of hearing them; they're part of our identity; they form and shape who we are. This holy table is where we continually renew the family likeness of Jesus. The sacrament of Holy Baptism is our initiation into this family. The sacrament of Holy Communion is our ongoing nourishment in this family. Here we receive the life of Christ. And from here we go into the world to invite others – young and old, rich and poor, black and white, educated and uneducated, to join the family.

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