

Sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street Sydney 4th October 2015 by Rev Ross Smith. Lectionary Readings: Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews: 1;1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10: 2-16.

Valued Families

The church has not always had a positive attitude about marriage. Gregory of Nyssa called marriage a “sad tragedy,” Ambrose terms it a “galling burden,” and Jerome thought the main value of marriage was that it was helpful in producing future virgins!

You and I have our physical, spiritual, cultural, economic and political origin in family. We grow in these dimensions of life in the context of families of different kinds and sizes. As little ones, we absorb values and are taught how to make choices and weigh things up in families.

As we are coming shortly to a family celebration called “Induction of New Members” we reflect on what it is like to be a family today. As a nuclear family, as a church family, as little ones.

Some families may start off, nowadays, as single parent, or unmarried parent families. Some as two parent, some have divorce or separation occurring sooner or later, some have mixed parentage as parents remarry or form a new partnership. Marriages have tough times, and chances of renewal. So do church families, and little ones, the ones we take into our arms and bless.

There are also extended families – some quite small in number, some large. In some, care is taken to keep in touch with and utilise the skills and availability of close relatives, cousins and grandparents. The function of these extended networks is to enable a wider range of caring, of showing interest and giving love, providing different role-models.

There are other groups that fulfil family functions: Sporting groups, schools, friends and their families and community organisations. In this category comes the church. Membership of this community is a valuable addition because it provides a more diverse range of attitudes, styles and beliefs than what friends and family provide.

Some have said “If you can learn to love your church family, it is no trouble to love anybody!” We have many things in our worship that give us cues to help us love and appreciate each other. We need these cues to keep us alert and appreciative.

“The Gathering of the People of God.” Here we exchange greetings, as we do in family, to acknowledge who we are.

Next we praise the whole creation in opening prayer, followed by a confession and absolution. These acts acknowledge our common origin and imperfection and need for openness to the future. We are receiving each other as we are.

In “The Service of the Word” we hear stories of those who have gone before us in various settings and challenging circumstances, and a contemporary witness to the liberating Word for today. Families also live by the stories they tell and their responses to events and traumas.

Then comes “The Service of Offering.” This may include rituals, such as baptism, confirmation, induction of new members and commissioning acts for elders, lay preachers and so on. Symbolically we bring forward offerings of money and dedicate it to the mission of the church. Also we lift up of prayers for the church and the world.

In our individual families we also look to common concerns and plans to provide for the needs of individuals and the group. We celebrate transitions, such as birthdays, anniversaries, new jobs.

On first Sundays we celebrate communion as part of that service of Offering. Communion is a shared meal made of our Lord's broken body and poured-out-Spirit. In this act we offer up our own broken and poured-out lives. In families we share meals and assist each other with words of possibility and encouragement.

“The Sending Out of the People of God” is done with words of blessing and words of mission. In families we farewell each other with blessings and affirmations to help the journey onwards.

It is good to remind ourselves in this kind of way of the importance of maintaining the fellowship of family, church or any organisation. These rituals help the survival and growth of the members of families, whether they are nuclear families, single or two parent families or even when children have no parents and are placed in institutional or adoptive care.

In the gospel for today I sense an underlying care for families in Jesus' words about marriage, children and divorce. We know from church history and reading the epistles that Christians and others have struggled to come through the traumas that separation and divorce have brought.

The marriage ceremony is framed with the knowledge that families need a long-term commitment and thus we have the words of the Vows: “To love and to cherish as long as we both shall live.” This is an avowal of the intention to face, come through and grow despite the traumas of our family life.

It is that challenge the early church fathers I quoted earlier could clearly see when they spoke of the sad tragedy, the galling burden of marriage. There are a lot of hurdles to be leapt and a lot of growing and development required to prosper in relationships. Sometimes we find we cannot clear the hurdles, or grow and develop and have to move on.

We recall the style of Jesus as he went about his mission. He saw new territory, new possibilities and focussed on keeping his life in a productive mode, not being held back by failure in one place or another. He laid down his life and he picked it up in a new way.

He took his family with him, or, we may say, created a wider family. He moved on from biological to mission family. His family included the disciples and their entourage, with all their shortcomings, blindness, deafness and lack of charity. His future family he saw as beyond the narrow bounds of his nation and throughout the world.

As we celebrate the induction of new members today, we remind ourselves that in the church there are no single-parent, or two-parent families. In baptism we are all “family.” We grapple with what it means to be faithful to each other in the church family, to enable gathering, words of welcome and absolution and possibilities of new beginnings.

We know that difficulties faced together can strengthen our bonds. “Loads shared are loads halved,” we say. We know that no-one has yet attained perfection, that each one needs words and gestures of affirmation, each one needs to have an enlarged world and a clearer vision of the future.

Someone has said “The longest journey we ever travel is the difficult trip from the “I” to the “You.” But without undertaking that risky pilgrimage we will remain stunted and unfulfilled.”

So we are members of a community of fellow travellers, always moving on in understanding, acceptance and finding new ways to be creative, joyful and fulfilled. We believe that Jesus gives us more abundant life, life overflowing.

As the Psalmist said, “You honour me as your guest, and you fill my cup until it overflows. Your kindness and love will always be with me each day of my life.” (Psalm. 23: 5,6 C E V).

Now, as we “Induct New Members” and come to Communion, we remember to give thanks for the saints who brought us into this world, who led us through it, and who someday will help us out.

“Now I stand on solid ground! And when your people meet, I will praise you, Lord.” (Ps. 26: 12).

See that love, that abundance. Pray that God will grant us the wisdom to live our lives in such a way that others, particularly the little ones, might see the love of God reflected in our love for them.