



ST HELIERS CHURCH  
& COMMUNITY CENTRE

# + ◦ TAKEAWAY ◦ SUNDAY SERMON

**Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> June 2023, 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**Sermon: Not peace, but a sword!**

Jesus touches a nerve – doesn't he? – when he challenges family loyalties. For many of us, I imagine, the family bond is the deepest relational bond we have. The closest thing we have to sacrosanct. We would do anything for our parents, spouse, children. These relationships cut to the very core of our identity. And the idea of prioritising anything – even allegiance to Christ – over one's family is immensely challenging to say the least.

You've heard the saying: "blood is thicker than water". It means that, despite our bond to one another through the waters of baptism, our connection to kith and kin goes deeper.

The saying originated in medieval Europe. It certainly doesn't come from Jesus, whose words today seem to put things the other way around. I wonder if Jesus might retort: ah! but water is more fluid than blood.

By the waters of baptism, God invites us into a new family, which challenges and transcends even those most deeply held bonds. As Paul famously puts it: "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female..."

And if Jesus' words are challenging for us, they would have been even more challenging to his Jewish listeners, for whom family was everything. At the risk of overstating it: family is Judaism.

Most of us will remember the ten commandments from Sunday School days. And so you'll know that the fifth commandment is honour your mother and father. In other words, loyalty to and care of one's family is a fundamental part of belonging to Israel and of living faithfully before God.

It's a principle which is deeply embedded in the Hebrew Scriptures – the Old Testament – which tells the story of God's relationship with a particular family, the people of Israel. And so for Jewish people to speak of the family of God is to speak of the nation of Israel. And by honouring your father and mother you are placing yourself within that genealogy, within that family, as an inheritor of God's promises of life and salvation to Israel that have been passed down from generation to generation.

Which is why Jesus' words come like a bombshell. "Whoever loves father or mother or son or daughter more than me," he says, "is not worthy of me."

It's tough stuff. And in these words, Jesus is placing before us a question: who is family? Those who share your blood, your DNA? Those you grew up with? Those who share certain experiences? Or share your nationality? Or your religion? Those who share your ethnicity or ancestry?

What parameters do we put around who's in and who's out? As we know that question is not simple. Each of us would answer differently depending on our own experience.

That question – who is family? – is at the heart of our Old Testament passage as well. Abraham and Sarah had been desperate to conceive, but were unable to do so. And so with Sarah's encouragement, Abraham sleeps with her servant Hagar, who gives birth to Ishmael.

But as we know, Sarah later miraculously conceives and gives birth to Isaac. And as our story goes today, once Isaac has been born, Sarah is consumed with jealousy at Hagar and Ishmael and demands that Abraham send them away.

Which he does, leaving them to die in the wilderness.

But God has other plans. For God's definition of family transcends our own. And the blessing he gives transcends the barriers we erect. So God's blessing of Abraham is extended not only to his legitimate son, Isaac (and through him the people of Israel), but to his illegitimate son-of-a-slave-girl Ishmael as well.

And so, through Ishmael and Isaac we see the emergence of two family lineages, which continue to be evident today. Isaac gives birth to Jacob, who is renamed Israel. And the Israelites – as their name suggests – claim to descend from him. Through Christ, Christians claim to be adopted into the line of Israel and so we are part of God's family through him.

Ishmael, on the other hand, is the forefather of the Ishmaelites or Arabs. It is through Ishmael that the prophet Mohammed claimed to be descended from. And so Muslims also lay claim to the blessing of the Abraham through Ishmael.

Hence why Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are known as Abrahamic faiths. We claim to descend from the same family.

And yet, how we have fought over the years, our different lineages causing us to bicker and fight and kill each other in the name of the very God of Abraham, who is supposedly father of us all.

And while the Abrahamic faiths seem very good at fighting one another (let's put it down to the sibling rivalry!), the problem is universal. Human beings have always fought one another. Nation vs nation. Religion vs religion. Tribe vs tribe. Family vs family. Person vs person.

Through Abraham, we're told, is the blessing of God to every nation on earth. And yet, through Abraham is also the curse of Isaac and Ishmael that we are destined to bicker and fight with our human siblings til death do us part.

...In my opinion, it can scarcely be overstated that, in the Hebrew Scriptures, God's promise to bless Abraham's family extends, even at that early stage, beyond the people of Israel... God's family is more inclusive, more encompassing, more expansive than any one nation, any one people, any one religion, any one family. The blessing flows over, more fluid than the blood.

And so we begin to see in the Mosaic law, provision for the widow and the orphan, the stranger and the refugee. Those without a family are invited in. God's family is ever growing. Every expanding its boundaries.

It seems to me that, in our reading today, Jesus is continuing in that tradition, challenging us to broaden our definition of who is family. He comes with sword to cut down the barriers we erect, for God knows no such barriers.

This is cost of being a missional people. We are called to challenge our biases, to go beyond those tight familial bonds. To put ourselves on the side of the widow and the orphan. The stranger and the refugee. Those without a family – that we might become their family. And we do so in the conviction that God's blessing is theirs as well; and that our family is not complete until they are with us.

Often we talk about caring for the widow, orphan and stranger in a hypothetical sense. But I'm not sure it's so hypothetical. You know, I prepared most of this sermon on Tuesday, which was World Refugee Day – a day to remember the plight of people forced to flee their home; a day to honour them, and to celebrate their strength and courage in the face of adversity.

And when I woke up Tuesday morning – on World Refugee Day – the headline in the newspaper was of the ship off the coast of Greece that had capsized with approximately 800 refugees on board. These men, women and children were fleeing

from Northern Africa, Syria, Palestine and Pakistan. Some have been saved, most are presumed drowned.

800. That is approximately ten times the gathering here this morning. Of course, it's hard for us to visualise. And it's so easy to get desensitised to news like this because the refugee crisis has been ongoing for many years. It's nothing new.

In New Zealand, the problem seems so far away. Of course, we have refugees coming to our shores as well but, generally, because we're so hard to get to, we are sheltered from the severity of the crisis.

We know that in Europe, however, the refugee crisis has proven immensely politically and socially divisive. It's been a significant factor in the polarisation of European societies and the rise of populist and far-right political movements over there.

The peace, so to speak, has been disrupted. If I may use Jesus' imagery, like a sword, the refugee crisis has violated the status quo. Social services and welfare systems have been pushed to breaking point. And the influx of refugees has placed a huge economic burden on the nations receiving them.

And so we've been reading in the news how patience is wearing thin. And how politicians have taken advantage of that. People are generally happy to be welcoming and hospitable when there's more than enough to go around. But when that hospitality comes at a cost, when there's not enough, it becomes a lot harder to welcome the stranger with open arms.

When push comes to shove, if it's a choice between "our own" or the stranger, well, surely our first duty of care is to our own? It's an inclination we all share I think. Whether "our own" means our biological family, our culture or ethnic group, our religion, our nationality. We have an inherent bias towards our own.

It's that inclination, I think, that Jesus is challenging us to move beyond in our reading today. In the guise of the stranger and the refugee, he comes to us like a sword disrupting the peace of the status quo.

So may the water flow more freely than the blood until the day when every orphan, widow and stranger is welcomed in and the family of God is made whole. For the blessing of God belongs to them as well. Amen.