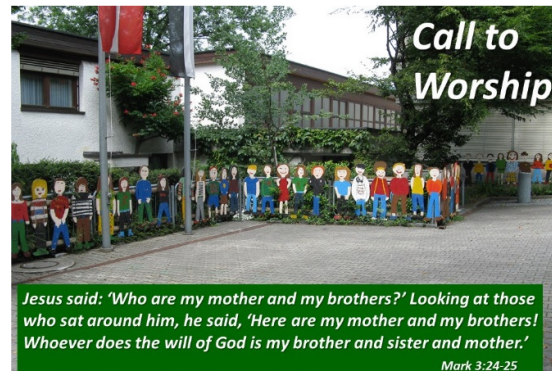


## Family Issues and Jesus. Reflections on Mark 3:20–35

Jesus had family issues. Mark tells us about it in his gospel. His family “went out to restrain him, because they were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind’.” That is the literal and most natural reading. Some translations like the NRSV, soften it to read “because people were saying”. On all accounts, the family was certainly intervening and felt the need to restrain him, to call him to his senses. To say someone had gone out of their mind or was beside themselves was a gentler way, then, of talking about forms of mental illness. Usually people understood mental illness as the result of an unclean spirit or demon getting into them.

This makes sense of what Mark has sandwiched between the beginning his of story where the family approaches in 3:19–21 and Jesus’ response in 3:31–35. Inserting one story into another was a way of shedding light on both. Accordingly, Mark reports that some of Jesus’ critics, namely some scribes from Jerusalem, accused him of just that: having a demon or worse, being in league with the prince of demons, Beelzebul (3:22–23).



Jesus challenges their critique as making little sense if he is liberating people from demons – which was how he understood what he was doing in helping people with mental illnesses (3:24–27). He then warns them, not so much about the slander they direct at him but about their slandering the Spirit of God, because if you reject God’s Spirit you reject forgiveness and hope (3:28–30).

The family was in danger, too, of failing to see that Jesus was acting in accordance with God’s Spirit. Jesus’ response to their well-meaning intrusion into his activities is to turn round to those listening to him and say: “Who are my mother and my brothers? ... Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (3:34–35). The same kind of distancing from his family occurs just a few chapters later where he responds to the people gathered in his own home synagogue in Nazareth, who say, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” (6:3). Mark notes that “they took offence at him” and continues: “Then Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house’” (6:4).

Some see Mark here dealing with issues in the wider church in his own day, probably some 40 years later, where Jesus’ family had exercised significant control or had tried to. Some 20 or so years earlier when Jesus’ brother, James, was in charge of the church in Jerusalem, a delegation arrived in Antioch from James’ church insisting that Paul and others, including Peter, should not be meeting regularly for fellowship meals with non-Jews. It led Peter and even Paul’s companion, Barnabas, to toe the line and withdraw, but not Paul. We read his own account of the incident in Galatians where he as much as said: James, you have not understood your brother. His message was that all people are loved by God and offered a relation with God based on faith quite independent of their ethnicity (Gal 2:11–21). This was not the last example of family interests producing problems for family based enterprises.

More likely, Mark is passing on early historical tradition which preserved this story of Jesus’ tension with his own family. Later generations which began to idealise the family would tone down such stories. Both Matthew and Luke, writing perhaps just 15 years later and using Mark as one of their sources, omit at least the opening scene where the family wants to restrain Jesus. Later certain

value system came into play which led to the notion that Mary remained a virgin and that the obvious references to Jesus' having brothers and sisters should be read as referring to cousins, as if Mary would have been worthy of less honour if she had been a normal mother of a family. These reflect values of later times, much as I respect that for many such idealisation of Mary has brought hope and comfort especially in a world otherwise dominated by male grandeur.

Back to the story, we can imagine that Jesus' family would not have seen themselves as at all out of order. Family was important. Households were the basis of the economy and usually the main source of income through agriculture or crafts and therefore of support for all family members, the young and the elderly. Firstborn sons, especially, had a duty once they reached marriageable age, around 30 those days, to marry and have children. That was the norm. Stability was important. Families were a key element in holding society together, keeping things the way they had always been, keeping the rich, rich, and the poor, poor. The family acted as one would have expected any responsible family to act.

Jesus was one of the few who refused to conform. He stepped outside the norm. What is more, he encouraged others to do so and built a team around him of people who had abandoned the system. The poor were not to remain poor. That might be the way to peace and stability in the empire and kingdom of Rome, but it was not the way of the empire and kingdom of God. Inspired by the visions of the prophets he held out hope for change. He declared: "Blessed are you, poor, for you in the kingdom of God". And to the hungry he said: "Blessed are you hunger, for you shall be filled/satisfied". And to the downcast he declared, "Blessed are you who mourn, for you shall be comforted". His favourite image was of a feast, to which all were being invited, no one deemed unwelcome, the image which ultimately generated the practices of Holy Communion in which at best the vision is upheld.

Jesus wasn't just a dreamer. Using the methods and medicines of his day, he reached out to address the causes of poverty. To be sick or to have a disability inevitably meant poverty. He engaged on a ministry of healing, including reaching out to those deemed by many to be unwelcome and unworthy. Yes, this was crazy in the eyes of some. "Come back home, son. Settle down. Do your duty by us", you might have heard his family saying. Jesus called some to leave their families and tramp around Galilee with him on mission. He didn't, however call all to do so. He told others to stay where they were, but now to live with a different vision, a different set of priorities, where love was the focus and not the self-interest of the family.

At one level, there is more material in the early traditions about Jesus which is critical of family than there is of material affirming family. At another level, Jesus was laying the foundation for a new way of looking at family which put God and love at the centre of understanding family and its role in society.

Families can still see themselves as the ultimate authority. Always do what family wants, always vote how family votes, keep family well and wealthy even if that means keeping others poor or unhealthy. Family-centredness affects not only families. It also affects communities and nations. Let's just think about us. Let's make sure we have enough vaccines and to spare. Let's keep our contributions to overseas aid as low as possible and make sure they, too, serve our self-interest.

Families can still usurp God's priorities with their own, indeed seek to usurp God. But families can also be incubators of change, of health and generosity, of wholeness. With love as their priority they hatch miracles, produce wonders, share in the daring which is creation and procreation, companions of the Creator. We dare to engage, to be parents, to be friends and supporters of families.

There are no perfect parents. For those of you who are perfect, sit silently and bear with our reflections. You can read books, attend clinics, know it all, but sometimes you cannot escape doing parenting by the seat of your pants, as it were. Each child is different. What does that cry mean just now? What are those eyes saying? No time to look it up. You have to act. And sometimes you will be

spot on and sometimes you will not be. You can have nappy changing down to a tee, but the immediacy of need, of joy and pain, defies definition. You just need to act. You just need to love. You are vulnerable to your fallibility. There is no alternative.

Parenting needs, therefore, a good dose of forgiveness, self-forgiveness. Each time it is like we are doing it for the first time. This is not a time to beat up ourselves with anxiety and guilt. Let's just be human. Connect to your love and that will come through, even when you miss. Our role – and for some of us this is looking back over what feels like a hundred years! – is to bring being to birth. That goes way past that first moment. It is life-long or at least to the point where the fish swims free and of its own accord meets and greets us in its own waters or in ours with love, respect, and mutual support and affirmation.

For some it is hard to let go. Control, fear of giving freedom, anxiety about when to relax the constraints, can see us sometimes looking at babies 60 or so years old, who have never made it to mature adulthood and in whom your controls still constrain and inhibit long after you are gone. Do not be surprised if when you have lived in controlling families you are a controller, too, in your family, in your work, with those around you, because that is what your mind learned as the norm. You know you cannot let go, you must have answers and explanations, you dare not be vulnerable. Control is stability. Stability can stunt growth. It can kill life instead of giving it.

Sometimes we need to be saved from our families. Memories whether real or imagined may document to our minds the deficits of love we experienced and we live with the effects. Most people grapple with some love deficit from their early life's journey. Parents, we noted, are not perfect. Even with the best of them there will be fallibilities, failures or just accidents where love did not get through or we did not feel it and fantasised abandonment. We can spend our lives making up for love deficits. Some have few. They were even able to share toys as pre-schoolers because love did not need to be competed for. Others have many love deficits and, if they are unaddressed, will never share their toys, their wealth, their talents, their generosity. At best we make up for these deficits not by intricate analysis but by catch-up. Someone loves us. We take it on board. The anxieties subside. The energies are freed. We can see and feel safe to respond in love to others. Love begets love.

That's how the process works. It can take time. Water the plant regularly. Enrich the soil. Care for the broken parts. Bring the plant to flower and fruit. This is why Paul spoke of a new law of producing goodness: love is the fruit of the Spirit and regenerates itself as we open ourselves to be loved. Church, in that sense, is a place to play catch up on love's deficits, but more positively to be a place of renewal and creativity, a place for plants to grow. This is not madness. All else is madness.

We are called to be family, God's family. In the broader scheme of reality this is simply good health. It is to dare to share God's life. It is to reject the safe stabilities which enshrine inequality and discrimination. It sometimes means to say to Mary and James, Joses, Judah, Simon and your sisters: no! I'm not fitting in. But it also means saying to them and to others: let us be family, together. Let us be families and communities where love and generosity rules. Then perhaps Jesus will also turn round and look also at us and say: "Who are my mother and my brothers? ... Here are my mother and my brothers!" (3:34–35).

Bill Loader

*Prayer of Thanksgiving and Confession (early in the service)*

O God, in the beginning you gave birth to this universe,  
the child of your love, the miracle of growth,  
the wonder of new things, evolving, expanding,  
vast beyond our comprehension,  
in which we, too, make our home, become your family, and share your love.

**We give you thanks.**

O God, we give thanks for our human families,  
for those who through ups and downs in life  
sought to give us support, love and encouragement,  
in their fallibility, sometimes in touch with your love,  
sometimes out of touch,  
but we acknowledge that through it all you stayed by our side.

**We give you thanks.**

O God, we acknowledge our fallibilities, in parenting or as people  
we have sometimes been bearers of your love and wisdom,  
and sometimes we have not;  
we have sometimes watered the plants well and enjoyed their growth,  
and sometimes we have not.  
Forgive our failures, bring us back home,  
let us be your sons and daughters, your family,  
and begin again.

**Hear our prayer. TJCLA**

Seeing his boy afar off the father ran down the road to embrace him.  
And God says to us: welcome home.  
The door is never shut. Welcome, forgiveness and healing is always yours.

**Thanks be to God**

.....

*Prayer (after the sermon)*

O God, you have made us your midwives,  
to bring life and love to birth, to create true family, true caring.  
You call us to acknowledge our fallibilities, our failures,  
and to own our strengths and opportunities.  
You reach out your hand to lift us up.  
You reach out your hand to lead us on.  
Help us not to shrink back, not to resist forgiveness of ourselves and others,  
not to block your generosity in ourselves and others.  
Help us be your family, fill us with your Spirit,  
empower us to answer when you call.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.