



# The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> June, 2024

*"Mothers, sisters and brothers"*

## Listening for Sacred Wisdom

Mark 3:2-25, 31-35

Then Jesus went home, and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."

Then his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

### Contemporary Reading of Grace

Listen in to your heart, as a child listens to her favourite story –  
anticipating every word, carried by every emotion  
wide open to surprise,  
and you will hear your God telling your story

Once upon a time begins a timeless story  
in the heartlands of our lives  
where there is room for all of us  
to nestle into our Creator God,  
who loves stories.

Noel Davis ("Heart Gone Walkabout")

I think I'm a bit of a mystery to my brothers! I have four older brothers, and love them dearly. I've always known of their love and respect for me. I also know that my vocational choice intrigues them sometimes: what I do, and why.

This is all fine. We love each other. But just imagine the response, if it got back to them that I'd been dropping hints about being the "*Son of GOD*"! Or that I was healing people, willy-nilly. Without a Medicare provider number! They'd be right to worry!

Now, I'm not comparing myself to Jesus here - let's get that straight – but it's good to recognise that we generally bring something of our own stories to our encounters with Jesus' story. And the way Mark's Gospel tells it, Jesus is messing with people's heads, including those of his own family!

He keeps doing things they don't expect: stepping outside 'normal' behaviour, healing people, offending people, saying and doing provocative things. It's come to the point where his family are worried for his safety... and his sanity.

He'd already ignored the 'normal' way of behaviour in his family, when he gave up his father's business for the life of an itinerant prophet and teacher.

And now he's ignoring the normal way of behaving in public too. He's letting all sorts of people follow him and his bunch of ratbags around: eating and drinking on the Sabbath, healing people AND forgiving their sins.

So, at very least, he's claiming to act on GOD's behalf.

And as if THAT'S not enough, he's going round telling stories about the overthrowing of the way things are: politically, socially, religiously.

He's telling the 'riffraff' that our illnesses aren't signs of GOD's displeasure with us. Nor is our lack of wealth.

This is the mystical, untamed figure that is causing such consternation to the establishment, and to many of the people. (Remember, they didn't all like him!) Even his family wish he'd be more normal.

But let's stop and think for a moment about 'normal'.

In every age and society, 'normal' works as a means of socialisation, and of control.

That's a good thing; society needs norms, standards, and expectations of how people should relate and treat each other. That's really important.

But at the same time, 'normal' can also entrench unjust systems or ideas in place:

\*systems that are preserved because they support vested interests

\*systems that we put up with, because "*that's just the way things are*".

Jesus isn't content with that kind of normal! He isn't content with that kind of understanding of "GOD's family". He isn't content with a society - or a religion - that leaves people outside the reach of GOD's grace.

In GOD's name, he pushes beyond boundaries of blood, gender, kinship, social class... even race (sometimes).

In GOD's name, he calls people to imagine a different way of thinking and being; a way that he sees as the way of GOD. And his commitment to that way is so deep, so passionate, so obsessive, that he's willing not only to live for it, but to die for it!

He confronted those around him, and I don't know about you, but he confronts me as well! Because I find it difficult, regularly, to live up to his example and calling.

I wish I was like him. I wish I could push the boundaries like he did. And sometimes I do, but often I don't. Because I like being liked! And I also know that whatever other boundaries I might push, walking away from my family isn't one of them.

And so, probably like many of us, I live with a certain tension when I hear stories like this. How do we deal with that?

Part of the answer, I believe, means recognising that today's world is very different from the world of Jesus' day. I don't think that fact frees us from the calling to be a prophetic community of reconciliation, healing, and grace, but it does impact on how we go about it.

Our calling is to be faithful 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians, not 1<sup>st</sup> Century, because that's where we are. "*Where we are*" and "*what we can*", are essential to that calling. We should always be open to new leadings of GOD's spirit that push our boundaries, that call us into new situations and new service. But "*where we are*" and "*what we can*" are generally where GOD's Spirit meets us. So let's start there, and attend to them as faithfully as we can.

And for me, that's where Jesus' comment about his mother and brothers comes in. You know, the comment that seems pretty dismissive of his family... disrespectful even.

Rather than hearing it simply as disrespectful, though, I think we can also hear in it an affirmation of the people who have surrounded Jesus in that moment: the crowds.

I may be wrong, because I'm commenting from outside of Jesus' culture, but I get the sense of him holding his arms wide and saying "*these are my mother and brothers too*". "*These are my fellow travellers on the way of GOD*" - fellow pilgrims, if you like!

(I'm reminded of the line in the hymn we always sing at Pentecost: "*Widen our love, good Spirit, to embrace in your strong care all those of every race*". TiS 411: "*Filled with the Spirit's power...*")

I don't think we have to see it as a rejection of Mary and his brothers, in order to embrace a new 'family'. And to be quite honest, I find that really important. I don't want to write off or ignore the members of my family who haven't joined me on the path of Christian discipleship – which means most of them!

That doesn't change my love for them, or my respect for their convictions. They remain my brothers and sisters, and I continue to learn from them and honour them.

It just means that they're not my ONLY brothers and sisters!

Whether you like it or not... YOU are my brothers and sisters!

"*My brother, sister, and mother*", as Jesus said it in Mark.

People who do the will of GOD... If doing the 'will of GOD' is to love, then we each have something of an extended family!

Because, contrary to what we keep being told, love remains strong. We don't always see it, including among Christian people, but it's there. (I know that sounds like the opening lines from the movie "*Love Actually*", but I believe it to be true).

People love. We all know that to be true. Despite the best efforts of the people who want us to hate or fear people who are different.

People of good faith, are not all of the same faith as us.

Just like my brothers, who love me despite their curiosity at my life path!

Just like the people who follow a different path of faith, at least in part because of where they were born.

We don't have to agree, and I don't think we should gloss over or ignore the things on which we differ.

While not diminishing or being coy about the path I was born into, and choose to follow, they are worthy of my attention and love, and I of theirs. And often we find we have much in common.

Sometimes I think the way of Jesus is mad too! It's certainly countercultural, and often demanding. Sometimes the way is clear, and sometimes it isn't. Mostly, though, it remains the way that makes sense of who I am, of who we are, of the world we all have to live in together. It is my way. And I'm deeply grateful for the sister and brothers in Christ with whom I walk it - present company definitely included!

Together, let's keep on growing on that way. Let's keep on being as faithful as we can, to the teaching and example of Jesus. Let's keep on following it, in the grace of GOD's spirit. And may our *heart for life* worship GOD, and see GOD's heart in the world!

Blessings, *Rod Peppiatt*