

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 6 June 2021
11.00am Deacon Belinda Letby

Families! They can be the source of our greatest joys and our deepest sorrows. We are such a diverse bunch! I am really looking forward to spending time with my family – in person - in a couple of weeks. Like many people during this pandemic, I've not seen my family, my sister and brother, for well over a year now. The photo on the screen is of the three of us with one of our cousins. The baby is my brother, the sweet little girl at the other end is my older sister, and yes, it's me with my mouth wide open. In my defence my brother, bless him, was pulling my hair at the time so I was mid-scream when the photo was taken. The photo kind of sets the scene for our childhood. My sister the well behaved, sweet one, my brother winding me up and me rising to the bait. I was nearly always the one who caused my parents the most worry – the one who couldn't say no to a dare from my brother, the one who got into scrapes, the one who would be out playing for a matter of minutes before getting covered in mud, or falling of a wall or out a tree. And years later, I was the one who moved away from the family, became a Christian, got a divorce, married a minister, moved further away, became a minister. Maybe not odd for many families, but I did feel the odd one out in mine at times.

And, into our families others are welcomed in. I know that I felt a bit put out when my sister got engaged and then married. We were close and I knew that our relationship was never going to be the same again. The dynamics in a family change and there is a need to adapt to a 'new' way of being family.

I wonder what it was like for Jesus and his family. Did Mary and Joseph and his siblings think he was the odd one out? His birth would have been very different to that of his siblings – no wise men and shepherds visiting them with angels in tow. And he was probably the only one in the family who, as a young boy, found his way to the temple listening to the teachers and asking them questions. For years though he worked with Joseph as a carpenter living a very respectable life. And then he met up with John the Baptist, got baptised, left home, and travelled around

with a mixed bunch of people, speaking to crowds of people. And seemingly bringing the family into disrepute.

In the Gospel reading today, Mark tells us that Jesus' family are concerned for his well-being and they go and try to rescue him from the crowd. But Jesus is having none of it. He doesn't reject them, but explains that his 'family' now extends further than just them. It includes all those who do God's will, whoever wants to be part of God's family. It must have been difficult for his family to hear what he said, they may have felt hurt and less important. Why did he want to include outsiders, especially those who were excluded by their own families?

In the reading from 1 Samuel we hear about the demands from the people of Israel – they want a King. They are not impressed with Samuel's sons who had taken over from him as judges. They turned out to be corrupt and dishonest. The people of Israel want a 'proper' king – like the kings of other nations. Samuel, of course, took it personally. He had been in the role of judge, priest and prophet for them for all these years, securing their well-being, and **he** was the one through whom God spoke to the people. But God made it clear to him that it wasn't Samuel the people were displeased with, it was God. They had rejected God as their King. They wanted a human King, one who would lead them, fight their battles for them, a warrior-king. And when Samuel warns them what will happen with this sort of king as their leader, they ignored his warnings and insisted they had their king. They didn't listen to the voice of God.

This community of people had committed themselves to the leadership of the Lord, to living in the way of God and had promised that their lives would mirror the will of God. But their human sinfulness took over, their greed and a need to be better than others, to gain power and influence meant more to them than following in the way of God. They were listening to their own personal needs and desires, rather than listening to Samuel, to God's voice.

As a church community, we are all members of God's family, and we are a diverse bunch! We all have our own personal needs and desires. I wonder what sort of community we feel we are?

Are we like the family of Jesus – not keen on ‘outsiders’ – whatever that might mean – joining us? Do we believe we are good at welcoming in new members, new ministers, visitors, passers-by, those who live or work locally? And what does that ‘good welcome’ look like? Do we allow anyone new to be themselves or would we rather they conform to our ways of being and doing? How could we be more welcoming, more inclusive?

If you haven’t realised yet, June is designated as Pride Month – celebrating our diverse sexualities and gender identities. And I want to thank Anna Twomlow for sharing some of her story with us in Weekly. We hope to include similar testimonies and reflections each week during the month, and include a prayer each Sunday which focuses on LGBT+ people.

Hinde Street Methodist Church is a member of the Inclusive Church network. We shouldn’t have to say it really should we, as a church, that we are inclusive. The word Church should say it all. But sadly, too many people have felt excluded from many churches over the years, have felt excluded from the love of God, from the family of God.

This week we received a request for us to register as a Trans-Friendly organisation – so that those who have transitioned their gender to the one they identify with, would know that we are a safe place for them to be, that we would welcome them into our community, that we would allow them to be themselves without judgement, that we would embrace and celebrate their gifts and graces. Again, we shouldn’t have to say that we are Trans-Friendly, but it helps people to know where they can go and be safe and not be excluded or rejected.

What sort of community are we? Are we like the people of Israel – listening to our own voices rather than the voice of God? Whose voices do we listen to? The ones which speak as we do? Or the ones which speak of things we find difficult to hear? How can we discern the voice of God in the midst of all the voices? How do we listen with God’s heart?

Are there ways that we could be or act that could help everyone to see and know that God loves them? What do we need to change to truly be a Community of

Christ – not just welcoming in those who are the same as us, and not just *welcoming* everyone, but *accepting* everyone for who they are without judgement, and without expecting anyone to conform to our own way of being.

The hope is that our Growth Plan will address some of these questions. It will take all of us, as God's family, to make it a reality. And hopefully, along the way, we will grow, not just in number but in our understanding of what it means to love as God loves, of what it means to be God's family.

Jesus explained to his family - and all who were listening - a wider understanding of who is in God's family. Our work, as a Community of Christ, is to do that too and to ensure that more people hear and understand it – to hear that God loves us all just as we are, and we are all equal members of God's family. Amen.