

20:20 Vision – The Family

As soon as we say the word ‘family’, we start interpreting it according to the social structures of our particular time and place, and our own experience. I have often shared with ordinands words by Belinda Hollyer in her Introduction to a splendid anthology of poems about family called ‘Haven’t You Grown’. Let me share them now with you:

“A family can mean many different things. To you, it might just mean you and your mum and dad. Or it might mean you and your mum and your two brothers; and your dad, who doesn’t live with you; and your stepfather and stepsister; and some aunts and uncles and cousins; and a friend of your mum’s whom you call auntie (although she’s not related to you) and your gran and grandad who live down the road; and your other grandparents in Argentina, whom you’ve never met – oh, and Bubble the goldfish too.”

So you might like to reflect on what ‘family’ means to you. Work out the number of relationships there are in your family. There is a mathematical formula for that. Y is the number you count as ‘family’. So the formula is $Y \times (Y-1)$ divided by 2. So if you have Mum Dad and two children the number of relationships is 4×3 over 2 = 6. But if you take a wider family – those same four plus two sets of grandparents and two brothers and sisters for Mum and Dad – that is 12 people, and the number of relationships is 12×11 divided by 2 = 66. Some people come from much larger families than that. The number of potential relationships is extraordinary.

You might also reflect on how different it was for your grandparents, because the meaning of family has changed considerably in the last hundred years. It wasn’t all that long ago that you could assume that the extended family was in easy reach, probably even in the same town. Now we are unlikely to be as confined as that. Our children and grandchildren are all between 110 and 130 miles away, and my one brother is 5,500 miles away.

There has always been a risk of Christians imagining that there is some ideal form of family, to which we should aspire. But that is hard to justify. We can’t simply look at the Biblical record for some pattern we might emulate. Again, I used to share with ordinands this Biblical summary as a warning against that kind of dream. Here it is:

The second of the two creation myths in Genesis – Chapter 2 recalls that aloneness is not a good thing – so Adam needs a partner. However, Chapter 3, in the story of the Apple Tree shows that having a partner is not all good news. Come Chapter 4 we have Cain and Abel - Adam and Eve’s lads. The first family mentioned in the Bible. And as a model for family life today, on a scale of 0

– 10, it scores pretty low. About minus 3! At one stroke, Cain wipes out 25% of the world's population! Today we'd call it a *disturbing case of sibling rivalry*. Then we move on to come bits that we don't often get read out in Church – there are the families created by angels having sex with humans in Chapter 6 – modern stories of alien abduction spring to mind. God wipes out everyone except Noah and his family, and has another go. It doesn't get a lot better. There is the painful story of Sarah and Hagar, because the godly man Abraham has both a wife and a mistress. Abraham nearly sacrifices his son – an event which whatever its religious motivation would get him into trouble with the Child Protection people. Isaac and Ishmael have another round of sibling rivalry. Because of Sarah's jealousy Ishmael is cast out – the story behind the animosity between Jew and Arab ever since. And as you walk the streets of English cities you don't have to go far to meet today's Ishmaels. Young people cast out and rejected because of jealousy between the adults in their home. Let's continue: Jacob and Esau, and all that shenanigans about getting the birthright. Jacob's family is from a variety of mothers, and only last of all from his wife Rachel. Then we have Jacob's son Judah and his relationship with Dinah, who had been raped. Then the story of Joseph and his brothers who don't like him because he's grown too big for his boots. So they get rid of him and tell his dad he's been killed. And then all these years later they come across him and they're scared stiff of what he might (and would have every right to) do to them. And yet, somewhere in all this messy family life, with all its failures, is God. 'It was not you who sent me here, but God', says Joseph.

But still the story goes on. God working through David, despite the story of his relationship with Bathsheba. David in whose line came Jesus. And in the stories of Jesus again you find family life as it really is. Brothers falling out. Parents having favourites. It's all there. Family life has always had its strains and stresses. Indeed Jesus said that family betrayal was an inevitability for the first generation of Christians.

Nor can we look to some period of history when we 'got it right'. For example, few people today would feel comfortable with the assumptions in the 1662 wedding service that the wife is the property of the husband. So let's keep a sense of reality about all this. If we want to support families, we cannot do so from the position of being the people whose religion has perfected what family should be once and for all.

In 1995 the Board for Social Responsibility produced a Report which included this guide to what might constitute 'healthy families'. It is worth pondering.

- Can this family help its members to form deep attachments to one another and also let each other go?
- Can this family develop a sense of identity with the outside world that gives its members an experience of belonging, but also allows interaction with the wider community?

- Can this family encourage in its members a belief in their own value and in the equal value of others, learning to tolerate differences between people of different ages and gender, race, temperament and style?
- Can this family enable its members to acquire the knowledge and skills that they need to move on to the next phase of their life cycle?
- Can this family handle conflict, deal with sins against each other and find forgiveness and reconciliation?
- Can this family provide 'good enough' role models that convey the way in which women and men flourish emotionally as individuals in relationship with others, and that are consistent with the family's cultural and religious norms?
- Can this family find its own ways of coping with the times of crisis which it is likely to encounter?
- Can this family enable its members to contribute to the well-being of society, through the creation of new members and/or new understanding of what the world is about?
- Can this family play its part in transmitting spiritual values that are generally agreed to be of importance to society, as well as the religious belief and faith commitments specific to the particular community to which the family belongs?

The present Corona Virus crisis is going to put a lot of strain on families in all sorts of ways – money, jobs, anxiety, relationships. The likelihood is that we will encounter families being at their very best, and at their worst. We need to be supporting families by our practical concerns, and by our prayers.

If we had been meeting in church this Mothering Sunday, we would have sung the hymn that I wrote for the ecumenical service in London for the International Year of the Family. Maybe it can form a pattern for our prayers for families – Thanksgiving, Penitence, Intercession, as well as the prayer that God will be with us, our own families, of whatever shape, and with every family around the world which is under pressure.

We bring to you our thanksgiving
for family and friends;
the people closest to us all
on whom each one depends.
We celebrate the richness
of human company
and praise your love brought through them
in joyful litany.

We bring to you our penitence
for family and friends,
for all that mars relationships,
and seek to make amends;
to give, forgive and honour
we need your gift of grace
to recognise our Saviour
in every human face.

We bring our intercession
for family and friends,
that all may know the goodness
which your pure love intends.
we ask for strength to witness
to reconciling power,
that in our generation
new hope and peace may flower.

O Father, Son and Spirit,
the Family divine,
inspire us by your unity
our lives to intertwine.
Creator, overshadow us!
Descend, O holy Dove!
Our Saviour, make earth's families
communities of love!

Amen.

To end – a poem from that anthology I mentioned at the beginning. It is called 'Quilt' and is by
Janet S.Wong

Our family
is a quilt

of odd remnants
patched together

in a strange
pattern,

thread fraying,
fabric wearing thin -

but made to keep
its warmth

even in bitter
cold.