

## 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2023 – The People of God #5 ‘Connected – Being Family’ (Romans 8:12-17, Mark 3:31-35)

Last weekend was the annual Glastonbury Festival – I don’t know if any of you watched it, but over the last few years it’s become one of my must-see things. I try to spend as much of the weekend as I can soaking it up, and was fortunate this year that it coincided with the end of my holiday, so was able to watch a lot more than normal. As an aside my personal favourite moment was watching Rick Astley of all people and the band Blossoms singing a whole set of songs by The Smiths, who were one of my favourite bands as a spotty, melancholy teenager in the 1980s. As it happens, I’m a spotty, melancholy 50-year-old now, so only one word in that description has really changed!

By the way, I’ll never actually *go* to Glastonbury – if you can watch everything from the comfort of your sofa, why would you?? Actually, I know why – what people go for is what I call a secular taste of heaven. I don’t mean that heaven will mean camping in the dust or the mud, or long queues for the toilets – at least, I hope not. But the Glastonbury festival is really a huge act of worship, albeit one not directed at God. When you look out at thousands of people, all singing joyously with their hands raised in the air, what does it remind you of? People go to Glastonbury for many of the same reasons they go to church – to feel community, to sing with joy, to experience a gathering of diverse people, all connected by a shared love – in this case of music. As I said, it’s like a glimpse of secular heaven.

As we continue our big summer series on what it means to be the people of God, this month we look at some of the key images in the New Testament used to describe the church. As I looked out at all those thousands of people at Glastonbury last weekend, I found myself wondering what makes the church different from this festival? After all, the churchyard gets muddy in winter and most churches also have inadequate toilet facilities and are rarely the right temperature to sit in, so we can’t even claim the benefits of luxury compared to June in Somerset! **The church has to be something more.... and the good news is that it is.** And one of the ways the bible helps us to appreciate this is through these images, which we’ll be looking at over the next few weeks. The people of God are described as a temple (the place where God lives), a bride joyfully wedding her love, a body (all joined together), a light shining brightly into the darkness – and we begin this week with the idea of church as a family.

It’s often said that you don’t get to choose your family – and we’ve already noted that this is at least partly true for the church, too, since we rejoice in the fact that first and foremost God chooses us! It’s also true that **the church is meant to function as a real family**, and today we’ll look briefly at what that means as both a spiritual reality and a practical reality.

So, first, let’s do the theology. When we talk of fellow Christians as sisters and brothers, we’re not just being nice, or cheesy, or over-familiar, **we are describing a spiritual reality.** In our passage from Romans, St Paul talks about us being ‘co-heirs with Christ’ (v17). What he means is that, thanks to Jesus, his followers get adopted into God’s family (v15). Anyone who is *in Christ* – to use the term Paul uses in many of his letters – gets access to the same blessings as Christ does.

We receive his Spirit, and this Spirit enables us to call God Father, just as Jesus does. So, we can really pray the Lord’s Prayer just like Jesus does. When we begin ‘Our Father’ we’re not just copying Jesus, or parroting the words, we are referring to God as our loving heavenly parent, too. As Paul says, ‘the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children’ (v16). In other words, we really come to believe that we are children of God – not just servants, or believers, but *children* – in other words, loved and cherished and nurtured, just as a good parent would do for their child.

This is big stuff – and perhaps hard for anyone whose own family life was not as described here. But part of God’s redemptive work in us is that **God becomes the parent we always wished we had, and the church becomes our true family.** It’s not that we don’t look after our own family – the bible is also equally clear that we still our best in our own human families – but we have another family, too: the family of the people of God, the family of the church. All of you!

And this family is as important as our blood family, not least because they will also be our eternal family. Even Jesus, when his family came to try and stop him doing what he was doing in Mark 3, said openly that anyone who followed the Lord was part of his family. It's not that he wasn't a good son or brother – his mother was by the cross as he died, and two of his brothers became leaders in the early church, so his relationships with them must have been close – but Jesus makes it clear that our spiritual family is every bit as important as our human family.

So, when we use the words 'brothers and sisters', let's always keep in mind how precious this is. In the early church, it was positively dangerous: their opponents in the Roman Empire accused them of incest because they used the language of sister or brother to refer to their wife or husband, and Christians were martyred under this false accusation – but they refused to stop using the words because they understood the value of a spiritual family. It's why, today, believers in dozens of countries will meet in secret even at the risk of arrest and imprisonment, because the chance to be with our true family is so precious.

**But let's also acknowledge that with this spiritual reality comes practical consequences.** Like any other family, to be part of the family of God brings both privileges and responsibilities. We've looked at the privileges, but let's not forget that we are also responsible to each other and for each other. And that's the hard bit. Elsewhere St Paul reminds Christians to do good to everyone, but *especially to those who belong to the family of believers* – he wrote that in one of his earliest letters (Galatians) so it was an established principle right from the start of the Church. Indeed, the early church shared their possessions freely, and whilst we may not go as far as common ownership, it's clear that being a family means we are expected to look out for each other. (Look around you:) Who can you look out for today?

We also need to be realistic that **the family of the Church presents the same relationship challenges as any other family.** We upset each other, we might fall out, we have to live with dominant personalities and shy observers. The great pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer talks about 'disillusion' with church as a great failing of many Christians: and what he means is that disillusion is precisely that – people carry an illusion that church will somehow be perfect, and what they get is dis-illusioned. They hit the reality that community life is hard, and instead of embracing that as a vital part of real discipleship – in other words of learning to love people like Jesus, with humility and unconditionally – they give up and assume that church isn't what it ought to be.

Now, clearly what we're not talking about here is anything abusive, there's no justification for that – but let's repent of the illusions that cause many of us to criticise the church the whole time. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbour as ourselves, the meaning of the text is not 'love your neighbour as much as you love yourself', it's 'love your neighbour *as a human being* like yourself' – i.e. a flawed, broken work in progress who makes the same mistakes as you do, let's be honest.

**So, church is a place to be broken together, each of us slowly being made whole, and slowly learning to live and love like Jesus.** As someone once joked, if you find a perfect church, whatever you do don't join it, because you'll ruin it! The point is: yes, community life is challenging – as a pastor I know that better than most – but it's the crucible of love in which God is shaping each of us to be more like Jesus. Don't give up on it – embrace it. The biggest difference between us and the worshippers at Glastonbury is that the festival only lasts a weekend – they don't have to get along for more than three days. We're called to be a family for life, for ever in fact.

But thankfully, we're not alone in this process: we have the Spirit, leading us on – that is our secret weapon. As we all pray for grace to be God's true family today, let's finish with this encouragement, that those who are led by the Spirit of God really are the children of God. Amen.