

Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> June Mark 3:20-35

Tim Collins

### **Who are my mother and brothers?**

For many people, today, the 6<sup>th</sup> of June is an incredibly emotive date. D- Day. The Normandy Landings. Operation Overlord. The beginning of the End of the second world war – the end of a period of terror that the world had never seen or experienced before.

Over the years, film and tv have sought to portray the experiences of that world-changing event: films such as *The Longest Day*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Churchill*. And then there was the tv series, *Band of Brothers* – which followed a company of American soldiers as they trained and prepared for D-Day; their experiences of that day, parachuting behind the German lines to support the troops landing at Utah beach. As the series unfolded it went on to tell their story over the next momentous year, as they made their way through France and Germany, to Berlin. The promotional blurb ends with the tag line – “a tale of ordinary men doing extraordinary things”. Through the episodes you get to know many of the men in *Easy Company*, walk alongside them and begin to experience them coming together, to meld as an effective unit. You realise that this tight group of men are consumed by the day-to-day life of their immediate experiences; they are totally absorbed within their own social bubble; not always aware of the bigger picture, not always understanding the importance of their own efforts in the chaos and uncertainty of the war around them.

Their shared experiences of life and death deepen the bonds between them. Being together, working together, with a common agreed aim, they shape their future together. Of course they argue and bicker and

fall out with one another; of course they bear grudges and feel jealous and angry and annoyed and irritated. But they also look out for one another, protect one another, feed and support one another. And love one another. They are the epitome of a family. And these ordinary men, this ‘family’ if you like, doing extraordinary things, end up changing the world.

This deep sense of family, of bonding and belonging, is incredibly important to us; indeed, is important to almost all peoples and cultures around the world, because we know and understand that the family is the building block of society. The family, of whatever combination, and however you want to define it, is the source from which everything else in society flows. The economic, educational and emotional growth of a nation is dependent on the family unit. Community and society cohesion needs the family unit to determine purpose and parameters. And, as politicians and national and community leaders know, the family – this band of social brothers and sisters, of parents and partners - can change the world.

Family is important. And it was perhaps even more important 2000 years ago, in a small Roman province of Judea. At that time, in that place, family was the lifeblood of survival. Without family, then poverty, destitution and even death could easily and swiftly follow. Again and again, the Jewish laws emphasised the importance of caring for family members. Laws around inheritance, laws around re-marriage; laws around caring for widows and orphans. The family-bond was tight and long-lasting. It was normal for adult children to live close to their parents, at times even in the same house. The family unit would often be a business unit, as well, sharing everything in common.

For Jews, this close family-bond was part of the God-given fabric of thinking and being and living. Loyalty to the family was loyalty to Israel, was loyalty to God. Break a link, smash that chain and a central pillar of life would be threatened. It was an attack on the very foundation of society.

So, Jesus's words, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" would have not been merely uncomfortable hearing for a few people, but deeply shocking to all those present. Scandalous. What was he thinking? Why such deeply offensive language?

Now, it is easy to eulogise about 'the family'; to paint a lovely rose-tinted picture; of all members working harmoniously together; looking out for one another; celebrating achievements and embracing heartache; a suffusion of love and acceptance and care. And yet, we all know what the reality too often is: disagreement and dissension; misunderstanding and selfish desires; all too often so focused on their own immediate experiences, so totally absorbed within their own social bubble that they are not aware of the bigger picture.

And, partly, it was this lack of understanding by his own mother and brothers and sisters that Jesus was challenging. They were accusing him of being out of his mind; they were wanting to forcibly remove him from Capernaum, to take him home, to get him to give up what they saw as his foolish ministry. His family were so held within their own small, self-contained world that, at this point, they really couldn't see what he was needing to do. They couldn't see, they really didn't understand, that Jesus's mission and ministry was to realise the kingdom of God on earth. This was just so far out of the daily

experiences and understanding of his family. Of course they get it later; Mary will be there as they nail him to the cross; as they place him in the tomb; James will eventually lead Jesus's followers in Jerusalem.

But at this moment, "what is", cannot get in the way of "what will be". Time and time again, throughout his ministry, Jesus has made it very clear, that the old way of doing things is no longer possible. He has challenged the authority of the Sadducees and the Pharisees; he has called Peter and Andrew, James and John away from their family business, away from their families. And with the utterances of a few words - "who are my mother and my brother?" - Jesus slices through the whole traditional structure of family, of society. His is a different voice, a different mission, and it involves breaking hallowed family ties. God is doing the unthinkable: he is starting a new family, a new holy family. And is doing so without regard for ordinary family bonds.

This is shocking and challenging and deeply disturbing. It was 2000 years ago. It still is today. Jesus is turning our whole concept and understanding of family upside down. 'Family', he asserts, is more than mother and brother, father and sister; 'family' is more than a bond through blood; being a member of the family of God is an acceptance and willingness to walk with Christ; being a member of the family of God is a willingness to dare to love 'the other'; being a member of the family of God is to have a shared common agreed aim of seeking the Kingdom of God on earth now. And, if we accept this, if we listen to the words of Jesus, then we ordinary people, we 'family of God', doing ordinary things, can end up changing the world, forever. Amen