

The In-Crowd

Mark 3: 20-35

Now, if I say the names of the following actors to you, what is the one word that you will shout back at me?

Jennifer Aniston, David Schwimmer, Courteney Cox, Matt Le Blanc, Matthew Perry and Lisa Kudrow.

Friends!

I wonder how many of you watched 'Friends – The Reunion' last week. It was the long-awaited opportunity for the cast to come back together for the 20th anniversary of the show that aired for ten seasons in the nineties and noughties. We saw them have a read-through of a script, chat with James Corden about their time on the show and enjoy a game of Ross' iconic quiz. When I researched statistics about 'Friends', I was shocked to learn that a survey conducted in 2018 revealed that 68% of the UK population had watched at least one episode of the show, with 17% having watched *every* episode. That's 236 episodes! And, if you missed it, you can always catch up on Comedy Central where it's still playing.

The thing about the six friends – Ross, Joey, Chandler, Rachel, Monica and Phoebe - was that they were most definitely an 'in-crowd'. They were a small group of people who were regarded as fashionable, popular (maybe even powerful), but who didn't let many others join them. Whilst some famous names joined the sitcom from time to time, playing partners to the main cast, it's only the six friends who seem to endure. I wonder what you feel about being part of an in-crowd.

How many of you here today feel –

- Fashionable? (If no-one, why not?)
- Popular? (What qualities do popular people have?)
- You have some power in some area of your life? (If you think you have none, is that true?)
- Part of an in-crowd? (Good or bad?)
- Not part of an in-crowd? (Good or bad?)
- You want to be part of an in-crowd?

Is it true that in-crowds don't let many others join? Who do you think would be in Jesus' in-crowd? Do you think those people were fashionable, popular or powerful? What other qualities did they have and why did that upset some people at the time?

When we look in more detail at our passage today from Mark's gospel, there appear to be five groups of people. Let's have a look at each in turn.

First there were Jesus' disciples, with whom he *'went home'* in the first verse, probably to the house of Simon and Andrew mentioned in chapter 1. The passage immediately prior to the one you just heard read, is entitled *'Jesus Chooses Twelve Disciples'* and they are all named. These disciples became apostles meaning *'sent ones'*, serving God's kingdom. Jesus raised up twelve, and later seventy, whom he sent out to preach the message of God's kingdom. None of them were fully mature or equipped and, through the gospels, we see their various personalities come into play. Simon is given the name Peter, meaning the Rock, but he's always putting his foot in it, engaging mouth before brain, but becomes a strong leader to the other eleven; his brother Andrew seems quieter, happy to live in his brother's shadow. Then there are James and John, the Zebedee brothers nicknamed *'Sons of Thunder'* by Jesus, acknowledging that they were two rowdy boys, thunderous and passionate, but of course John is also referred to as the *'one Jesus loved'* suggesting a closer relationship than with the others. There's Thomas, who becomes famous for his absence following the resurrection; Matthew, whose history of tax collecting might not have made him very popular amongst the group; Nathanael, or Bartholomew, who Jesus saw under a fig tree before Philip introduced him; Judas who betrayed him; and the last few – Philip, another James, Thaddeus and another Simon. Jesus chose twelve men who were all different in their personality types, and it was no doubt humorous to Jesus at times, to observe how different these twelve men were and how difficult it was to form them into a band of brothers. To anyone on the outside, they were very definitely Jesus' in-crowd, and you wonder how many of the wider disciples – those in the outer circle - wished they'd been chosen be one of the inner twelve.

Secondly, there is the large crowd. We read in the first verse *'but once again a large crowd gathered, which prevented him from even eating a meal.'* And it's no wonder a crowd formed. So far in Mark's gospel Jesus has been sharing his message with the people, healing many who were sick with various diseases

and casting out many demons. When Jesus gets up early one morning to pray, the disciples search for him, and when they track him down, they tell him, *'Everyone is looking for you – they want you!'* The crowds are large wherever Jesus goes, with many wanting to be part of that smaller group who actually get close enough for Jesus to touch them, to heal them, to transform their lives.

Then, thirdly, there are the Pharisees, the religious leaders in the synagogue. Jesus has already called them out on their legalism – they cared more about Sabbath regulations than they did about the health of a worshipper. His question – *'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?'* – has an obvious answer, but they resist it. They now see Jesus as their enemy and what happens next is very instructive. It's impossible to claim that the deeds of Jesus aren't powerful, so they put forward a conspiracy theory for the source of his power: *'He is possessed by Beelzebub. By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.'* What this communicates is *'Don't trust him. He's a con. His power is evil.'* This sounds like a comment on social media rubbishing an individual or a movement and reminds us that there is nothing new under the sun. Hatred will always find a cover story and a way to dismiss the truth rather than respond to it. The Pharisees don't approve of Jesus – they don't want to be part of his crowd, though they're always there in the background watching what's going on - but their only way to assert their own authority is to cast doubt on the authority of Jesus. Again, nothing new.

And then Jesus' mother and brothers enter the frame, our fourth group. Families! Don't you love and hate them? Let's think about Jesus' family for a minute or two. His unique birth must have impacted Joseph and Mary's feelings about Jesus, and you wonder if his siblings grew up knowing how special Jesus actually was. Was there a sense of the family living in Jesus' shadow? Imagine the story of 12-year old Jesus debating brilliantly with the elders in the Temple being part of your family story. Then Jesus spent years helping his father in the family carpentry business. Very respectable. But what happens next? The star of the family teams up with John, that very oddball cousin, is baptised and leaves home, saying he had a special calling from God. He becomes a wanderer, attracting criticism from the religious authorities and collecting crowds of all sorts. What about the family business, the family reputation? What did he think he was doing? At the end of today's reading, Jesus' family try to bring him back home, bring him to his senses, but Jesus rebuffs them. He isn't rejecting them but making them realise his family is so

much bigger than just his birth family – ‘*Here are my true family members,*’ he says. ‘*For whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, and my mother.*’ It doesn’t exclude his birth family but includes on equal terms those in our fifth group – and that’s anyone and everyone who wants to be part of the new community he was creating - a community whose mission was to serve God, a community formed two thousand years ago but very much alive today in what became known as ‘the Church’.

Are *you* part of Jesus’ in-crowd? I very much pray so.

Today, we’ve reflected on the various groups that were around Jesus two thousand years ago – those who were definitely part of his in-crowd; those who wanted to be but always found themselves on the edge; and those who definitely did *not* want to be, so cast doubt on Jesus’ authority and undermined him to others. But this is what I want you to remember as you leave today. Jesus calls each and every one of us to follow him – to be part of his community – and many of you here today (listening at home) have been part of that community for years, decades even. But how do we draw in those who, today, feel themselves to be on the edge? If you go for a walk around the village, looking, listening and noticing, what needs and concerns, what people do you see? Are they – or at least their voices – present in our worshipping life? And if not, how can you welcome them in? How can they find their place and belong? And, if that’s you, sitting in church today (listening at home) and not feeling it - wanting to be part of the crowd but always feeling on the outside looking in - then do talk to me afterwards and we can arrange a time to chat further if you’d like.

Let’s pray:

Mother and Father God,
you invite us all to be part of your family,
unique members of your in-crowd.
Release in us qualities of love
that make your community attractive, healing,
open and welcoming to all.

Amen.