

Reflection

1 John 3:1-7

Families are really important. I think that's one thing on which every generation agrees, even if they each express it differently for different reasons. In today's generation of young families, there is a valuing of time with the children and with one or both parents working full time, this means they do not want to spend their weekends with the children doing one activity, while the adults do a different one. This is one of the reasons that traditional approaches to church services do not connect to young families any more.

Similarly, in New Testament times families were also important but expressed differently. Families were the be all and end all. The head of the family – typically the father, but if he had died, then the oldest surviving son, had power over all the women, children, and slaves who were members of the household. The Patriarch was central to the household and held the loyalty of every member of the household. Punishment for transgressions were metered out by the Patriarch, and this could include both physical abuse and actions such as selling an individual as a slave (or selling a slave where treatment might be worse).

As modern readers, we miss the radical nature of the imagery that is used to describe Christian community as the “children of God.” This has become part of our everyday theology and for the last 1500 years or so intentional Christian community have called each other “brother” and “sister,” a practice that continues to this day. Viewing the church as God's family has become normalised. It is insidious in our language and liturgy: think for a moment how many modern hymns we have that use precisely this language.

In the days of the New Testament, families were not simply about who was related to whom, but rather survival. It is for this reason that clans and tribes were important as it created networks of support in difficult times. We hear something of this in the story of Ruth where before Boaz can marry her, he needs to get the permission of the person who was a closer relative – a person on whom the women had a greater claim to ensure their survival.

Back then, as was the case until reasonably recently, there was no social security for those who needed the support. If you could not work, you simply starved... and then, like now, there were many reasons why people could not work, in fact, probably even more reasons, given a greater proportion of the work required physical fitness. Remaining connected to family was of critical importance.

However, there is an element of families back then that resonates with today's life and that is the mobility, at least of the middle and upper classes. Although remaining in the city of one's birth, where one held citizenship rights, was an attractive prospect, so too was the opportunity for upward mobility of a major trading centre, such as Corinth. People became separated from their support networks, which often was not a problem... until disaster struck.

Christianity offered a different way of relating. There were some times when it was the whole household who were baptised. Stories in Acts depict the head of the household becoming a Christian, and the whole household being baptised, regardless of their individual thoughts on the topic. However, we also know there were individuals who became Christian against the wishes of their head of house.

For these people their faith became a point of conflict and potential – even likely – separation from their family.

In this context, the church as family became something more than a nice idea. It was critical for survival. Sharing and mutual support is essential and is a clear expectation. If we were listening to this epistle being read from start to finish, we would have already heard the author talking about being children of God. Now the author spells out what this means.

In a world where religion was about paying tribute to appropriate gods to ensure wealth and success, whereas morality was the domain of the philosophers, the author of this epistle affirms the Jewish idea that faith without works is dead. Loving God means loving one's neighbour. Loving other members of the fellowship means loving them as if they really were family, and that includes during times when they are unable to contribute to the family's success.

In slightly later Christian history we see this call to love being worked out in a different way. In the late second century a plague – possibly smallpox or measles – devastated the Roman Empire and those who could abandoned the cities for the safety of the countryside. Often, sick or dying family members were left behind as people fled to safety. One small group remained, cared for the sick, buried the dead, and because of this had a substantial death rate. These were the early Christians showing once again what love meant and what it meant to treat all people as the family of God.

What does it mean for us today to take seriously the idea that we too are the family of God?