

**“GOD LOVES EVERY SINGLE ONE OF US”**

*Psalm 68:5,6*

Well, here we are again on Mothering Sunday, indulging in our annual bit of romance about the family. All over the place, people will be making a special effort to be nice to their mums and there will be dewy-eyed scenes of affection that are quite unknown on the other 364 days of the year. It's a family day and people are doing their best to put a brave face on it. In the Church, we also have our focus on the family – it's often the centre of attention as we organise family services, family outings, fun for all the family. It seems to be something to celebrate, something that we think of as being important and worthwhile. The renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead once wrote, *“No matter how many communes anybody invents, the family always creeps back.”* And, with the emphasis on mothers particularly, there's an old Jewish proverb (isn't there always?) which says, *“God could not be everywhere, so he made mothers.”* (That does, of course, presuppose a rather limited view of God!)

However, not everyone sees the family in such glowing terms. The playwright Strindberg (who was Swedish, so fairly gloomy as are most Scandinavians who spend half the year in the dark) wrote, *“The family! Home of all social evils, charitable institution for indolent women, a prison workshop for the slaving breadwinner, and a hell for children.”* Perhaps a little closer to the experience of most of us is the view of Ogden Nash who said that, *“a family is a unit composed not only of children, but of men, women, an occasional animal and the common cold.”*

And there are plenty of different views about the family in twenty-first century Britain, as well – views that are quite different from the nice, acceptable view that we usually try to portray in our church life. Back in 1991 (but it won't be that much different now, I don't suppose), a Gallup poll discovered that, of all the households in Britain only 25% conformed to the traditional family stereotype: 26% were single person households (unmarried and widowed people): 9% were lone parent households: and 36% were households of married or cohabitating people with no children. (For those of you who are doing the maths, I have no idea what happened to the other 4%.) Britain has the highest proportion of lone parent families in Europe – 14% according to other data – and almost 23% of those have actively chosen to be lone parents. Now, that's an awful lot of people who don't fit into our usual neat little category of two parents and some children.

But those figures are also a reality in our church life as well. We cannot say that we remain unaffected by the trends of the culture of which we are a part. Even though we are so besotted with the view of the nuclear family which is brandished by the advertisers in their attempts to sell us everything from health insurance to gravy granules, we have to realise that an increasingly elderly population will mean more widowed people, an increasingly fragmented society will mean more families whose make up changes

over time, an increasingly mobile population will mean families living geographically further apart, and an increasingly stressful society will mean more relationships tearing apart under the strain.

You could go into any church in the land – even here in nice comfortable, provincial Lichfield – and see, as you can here, singles who have never married, widowed men and women, lone parents, divorced and separated people, those who have been bereaved and found their family numbers diminishing. And yet we still put a huge emphasis on the family – often unwittingly excluding some from our activities and from some areas of the life of the church by our language and attitudes. I can still remember one Sunday back in London when I had preached in the morning on something to do with family values and my senior colleague had used an evening sermon in a series on *Genesis* to talk about marriage, and several people came up to me after the evening service and said rather ruefully, “Well, there’s been nothing here for me today, has there?” (That does betray a particular idea about what they thought worship is meant to be, but they had a point.) When Sally and I were at the point where it seemed we might never be able to have any children, it seemed that everyone else was having them and every activity in the church was geared to those who were trailing kids around the place. Now it wasn’t actually quite that bad, but it did seem like it to us. And part of our problem is that we don’t always see things the way others do, others who have different sensitivities, different circumstances, different priorities – and that goes both ways.

Now, in part, our idea that fulfilment can be found only in the family does stem from the way we look at the Bible. There is no doubt that in the Old Testament particularly, family life is seen as a blessing – a reward, even – for the righteous. The story of Ruth is one prominent example of that. Hannah’s song in *1 Samuel 2* emphasises that. In *Exodus 1:21* the faithful midwives are **rewarded** by having families of their own. And the *Psalms* are full of such allusions – just look at *Psalms 127:3-5* for example. (Mind you, a quiver full of them can often end up breaking your back!) But we’re not talking here about the so-called nuclear family – the happy parents, 2.4 children, a 4x4 and an unfeasibly compliant dog that the media and the social experimenters would sometimes have us believe is what family life is all about. We’re talking here about the extended family of parents, grandparents (who seem to be doing more and more of the work of the parents these days – but don’t get me started on that), children, nieces, nephews and even people from other places, other cultures who have joined the family unit. Human beings were not created to be alone it seems from looking at, for example, *Genesis 2:18*. We are relational animals who need whole networks of close friends and family to get the best out of life. (Unlike other animals – one writer pointed out that it’s only humans who welcome their children back to the nest after they’ve grown up – or when the student loan needs repaying.)

But, just as being part of a family was seen as a blessing from God, as a sign of approval of a righteous person, so were riches – and not everyone had them either. God’s laws make explicit and generous

provision for those who are disadvantaged materially so that no-one becomes destitute at the expense of the rich and the powerful (a principle we would do well to bear in mind when it comes to putting our cross on the ballot paper in a couple of months time). And God shows, too, that he cares very much about those who are left on their own.

When I was hurling those statistics at you earlier, I said that 23% of lone parents had actively chosen to live that way. Some of you may have gasped inwardly at that statistic – what shameful and thoughtless parents, you may have thought. But that means that 77% of lone parents have definitely *not* chosen to live that way – they have been forced into that situation by bereavement, desertion, domestic violence, intolerable behaviour and so on. God is concerned for those people and their welfare – he sees their dilemmas, their pain, their desperation. He hears the tearful cry of the widow, the frustrated scream of the deserted wife, the long, resigned lament of the bullied and the beaten, the constant questioning of the unwilling single. God knows about them – about you – and he is concerned that you are not left at a disadvantage, not looked down on or askance at, by the ignorance, neglect or prejudice of those who seem to be nicely set up in their families.

That's why we read *Psalms 68* this morning. It's a great Psalm to use in worship, as we've already seen. It is a magnificent processional *Psalm* which describes the path of God from the heights of Sinai to the new Temple in Jerusalem, composed for the occasion when the Ark of the Covenant – the holiest of holy Jewish artefacts – was taken into the Temple for the first time. *Vv1,2* describe God in his majesty and splendour, rising up and preparing to set out on the journey during which he will rout his enemies. These words would have been sung as the Ark was lifted up by the priests.

The next few verses (*vv3-6*) describe some of the reasons for God to be praised. And notice that the main reason for praise is not the destruction of his enemies, but the way in which God is the defender of the fatherless, the widowed and the lonely. God becomes that absent father, he takes up the cause of the widow, he gives the single person a treasured place in a family. Almighty God – the awesome and majestic Creator, the triumphant vindicator of his people, the infinite power behind the universe – cares specifically for those on whom society looks down. And let's make no bones about it, they were looked down on from a very great height in those days – just have a look at the stories of Sarah or Hannah in the Old Testament.

This is a God who is, as Derek Kidner puts it in his writing about this Psalm, "*the Kingly Deliverer*". Protection of the helpless and disadvantaged is one of the hallmarks of the good king, even according to the heathen tribes around (and should be the hallmark of a good government, but that went out of the window a very long time ago) – but here is the Ruler of the Universe taking the bereaved under his wing.

Derek Kidner goes on, *“He is so glorious that he rides in the heavens, but so compassionate that he remembers the poor of the earth.”* And another, earlier Old Testament scholar, George Adam Smith, echoes those words when he writes, *“Even in the times when he seems to be far above, dwelling in the separation of his unapproachable holiness, he is still caring and acting for the sad and the helpless.”*

The lonely are set in the family of God’s people. They are not to be left on the margins to fend for themselves, materially or emotionally, and Jesus himself actually showed the way as he hung on the cross. Just look at what happens in *John 19:26,27*. And, as we follow our Lord’s example, we find ourselves with a responsibility to look out for the needs of those who can so easily feel excluded. We claim to do it for the poor and we respond to the calls to help those in Haiti and Chile and Ethiopia and Iraq who are left alone and bewildered – we need to show that same concern for those who are actually part of our own circle. God has a special place for them – so should we. C H Spurgeon wrote of these words in his *Treasury of David*: *“How zealously ought the church to cherish those who are here marked out as the Lord’s special charge.”*

That also means, for the single person, the need to seize the opportunity to get involved. We are all part of the family of God – that’s where he has set us – and, as the old Moroccan proverb has it, *“None but a mule denies his own family.”* We need to offer and receive the help of those amongst whom God has placed us. If you say you are prepared to receive the love of God, you need to be prepared to receive it through whatever channel he chooses to demonstrate it.

God, the Almighty, who has blown away his enemies, *“as wax before the fire”*, has shown his love for all humanity at Calvary. In the extremity of that situation Jesus identified with the fatherless, with the separated, with the lonely as he yelled out in his pain and frustration, *“My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”* But in that same situation he was able to make provision for his own mother, left on her own by the events of that day. God loves very one of us. God loves every **single** one of us.

And whatever God has done in the past, God is doing still. George Adam Smith wrote about this Psalm: *“The ancient history glows with present life. Whatever God has done, he is doing still. No age of the Church needs to look back to any former and say ‘Where be all his wondrous works which our fathers told us of?’”* And Spurgeon before him wrote, *“To this day and for ever, God is, and will be, the peculiar guardian of the defenceless.”* Are you feeling lonely, frustrated, angry? God loves you and cares about you. Are you feeling contented, safe, secure in your family? Then look around and share what you have with those who long to receive. What God has done, he’s doing still. Let’s work together with him.