

## **“FOLLOWING THE KING - 33”**

### ***Matthew 12:46-50***

Families! Don't you just love them? I suppose we all have very different views about our families. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Oscar Wilde writes that they are “*simply a tedious pack of people who haven't got the remotest idea how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die.*” Maybe that was a rather jaundiced view of families in the nineteenth century – and one shared, it seems by Wilde's Scandinavian contemporary, Strindberg, who wrote that the family is the “*home of all social ills, a charitable institution for indolent women, a workhouse for the slaving breadwinner and a hell for children.*” I suspect both playwrights had some fairly heavy issues with their families, because few of us here would have such an uncharitable view of our nearest and dearest. But they can still cause us a few problems, can't they?

And here Jesus' family turn up to cause him a bit of difficulty. We don't often think about Jesus' family once he'd grown up, do we? Our images of him are either as a small child with the haloed Mary and Joseph (in the company of angels and various domestic animals) or, when he's grown up, alone or with a group of his disciples. But he clearly did have an earthly family. Obviously there was his mother, Mary, and his earthly father, Joseph – who was probably dead by the time this little episode took place (he is not mentioned after the first couple of chapters of the Gospel). But he also had some half-sisters and four half-brothers – James, Joseph, Simon and Judah: you can check them out in *Matthew 13:55*. It seems that none of them believed in his mission during his lifetime, as John tells us in *John 7:5*, but after the resurrection they had clearly joined the group of disciples as Luke mentions them in the upstairs room in *Acts 1:14*. In fact, James – probably the oldest of them – became leader of the church in Jerusalem, chaired the Synod of Jerusalem reported in *Acts 15* and wrote an epistle which is included in the New Testament (the aptly named *Epistle of James* – it's near the end of the Bible).

At this stage, though, Jesus' family are still outside the growing group of people who believe in what Jesus has to say and want to follow him. Matthew emphasises that when he remarks here that they are waiting outside – on the edge of the crowd – for their chance to speak to him. This little episode comes at the end of a section of Matthew's Gospel and he uses it to kind of round off what he's been saying about Jesus and his message, to re-state an important theme of Jesus' teaching which Jesus reiterates here. The next chapter, which we'll look into next week, begins a new section of Jesus' teaching, including some familiar parables.

Matthew doesn't tell us why they want to speak to him, but it's clearly important because they've all come along together. Mark – who also relates this story – tells us that they wanted to come and “*take charge of him*” because they thought he was going mad. They'd heard about what he was doing, heard about the uncompromising message he was proclaiming, heard about the various miracles and things he was supposed to have done and the arguments he was getting into with the religious and political leaders, and they decided they needed to go and save him from himself, as it were. Some commentators assume that they are part of the opposition, but it seems to me that they were just concerned for him and wanted to encourage him to come home and calm down. Just imagine how you'd feel if your son or your brother was wandering around making people think he was the Messiah, the one chosen by God to reintroduce order and peace and justice to the world. You might start off feeling rather proud of him and his independent ideas, but it probably wouldn't be long before you, too, thought he was a bit of a nutter and you'd want to try and talk some sense into him.

Anyway, someone on the edge of the crowd spots the family and goes to tell the great man that his mum wants a word. Jesus' reply is – even for us – quite shocking. And for people in a culture where the ties of family and the responsibilities of family members for each other were considerably more tightly woven into the fabric of everyday life, the words of Jesus would have been quite astounding. “They're not really my mothers and brothers,” he says. “Here's my mother and brothers – these disciples here, they're my true family now.” Ignoring your parents! It's a bit like someone running away to join the circus or leaving home to live in one of those odd communes they still have in the bits of Scandinavia that haven't

really got over the 1960s. When I was at school, we used to have an annual Founder's Day service in Winchester Cathedral – the whole school would gather for something which I can't now remember (which shows how good it must have been!). Our parents were all at the back of the congregation and on one such occasion as we all processed out behind our be-gowned teachers, my mum waved across at my brother, who very pointedly ignored her. The incident is still spoken of in hushed and incredulous tones even to this day, so great was my mother's sense of humiliation.

And that was just because my brother didn't wave at her. Can you imagine what Mary and James and the others must have felt when Jesus actually said to the crowd that his followers were his family now? There are those who take this apparently dismissive attitude of Jesus to betoken an anti-family prejudice. Jesus is opposed to the nuclear family and all that kind of thing, they say. He is abdicating his responsibilities as an oldest son. But that's clearly not what is behind this pronouncement. If you flick over a couple of pages in your Bible to *Matthew 15:3-6* you'll see that Jesus is very hard on those who try to wriggle out of their familial commitments. He is not saying that the family doesn't matter or can be dismissed or ignored. He is saying that being part of the family of God – a citizen of the Kingdom of God, if you like – goes way beyond any merely human ties.

The Kingdom which Jesus has come to inaugurate and of which he offers so many tantalising glimpses is far more important than anything else, even human family relationships. Some of you may remember Kaushil's moving testimony earlier in the year about the way in which his decision to follow Jesus affected the relationship he had with his family. As far as I know, he doesn't love them any the less, but his priorities are clear. And there are stories from around the world of the dramatic impact a decision to follow Jesus and opt into the Kingdom of God has caused turmoil in people's family life. It can have a powerful effect on the lives of those who are determined to put the values and attitudes of this Kingdom above all other considerations whatever their cultural or religious background. And that is Jesus' point in saying this – and Matthew's point in putting this story in at this point in his gospel.

As we've already said, this is the end of a section of the Gospel Matthew has written for the newly believing Jewish members of his fledgling Christian church in the first century. He is stressing once again that the decision to follow Jesus is not one that should be taken lightly, but it is nonetheless a decision that needs to be made. After the encounters that Jesus has had with the Pharisees and with his family, the point is that you can be religious, like those Pharisees, or related to Jesus, like his family, but neither religious practice on its own, nor religious pedigree alone grants access to the Kingdom of God. Once again it comes down to something we have said again and again looking at Matthew's story of Jesus and his teaching.

When responding to Jesus, there is a need for conscious decision. Neutrality is not an option. You cannot drift into the Kingdom. You cannot be a part of the Kingdom through someone else. You cannot refuse to make your mind up – because that is, in and of itself, a decision to reject what Jesus says. Look at what Jesus says here is the criterion for inclusion in the Kingdom, the criterion for being considered one of the family – Jesus' family. Who are his mother and brothers and sisters? Those who "*do the will of my Father in heaven*". That's what it all boils down to – the decision to obey God and trying to follow what he wants.

The Pharisees had started off by trying to do God's will, but they'd lost sight of it in all their religious paraphernalia. They were so consumed by the need to do the right things in the right order in the right place and at the right time, that they'd forgotten completely why they were doing it all. It wasn't about values and attitudes any more: it was about just modifying behaviour and trying to look good. As Jesus points out on more than one occasion, they end up just looking ridiculous, and not really furthering the cause of the Kingdom one bit.

Jesus' family at this point just couldn't grasp what he was on about. It seem like the raving of a madman. But again, that's because they had their own conception of what was involved. They couldn't get their heads round the radically transformative nature of Jesus teaching. They saw him only as their little Jesus

(in Mary's case) or their big brother who didn't seem to be doing what he should, as head of the household. The idea that he was the Messiah was beyond them.

Jesus' disciples, though, had recognised who Jesus really was – although very imperfectly, as we see on various occasions in the Gospels – and that there really was no other option. Jesus had presented them with an offer they couldn't refuse and they had taken the crucial and life-changing decision to do something about it. They were learning little by little to do God's will, to live their lives as he wanted them to. That was having an effect on them and on those with whom they came into contact. They weren't just giving it intellectual assent – it's not a box ticking exercise. They were demonstrating practical obedience – not just hearing the words of Jesus but doing them. (Remember the story of the two builders? It's all woven together.)

So what's your response to this story? You've heard it now, so you can't ignore it. And Jesus is calling you to make up your mind. Are you going to turn away once again and say that you have more important things to do, other priorities that you have set, stronger ties to other people than you want to have with Jesus? If you do that then you need to remember what Jesus has already said in this Gospel – that he will remind you of that decision when the chips are really down and it's too late to change things (*Matthew 10:32*). Or are you ready to follow him, to do the will of his Father in heaven and so become a member of his family, a citizen of the Kingdom of heaven? I know I'm biased, but that seems to me to be what they call a no-brainer. Come along and join the family!

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He is stressing once again that the decision to follow Jesus is not one that should be taken lightly, but it is nonetheless a decision that needs to be made. Jesus says here that the criterion for inclusion in the Kingdom, the criterion for being considered one of the family – Jesus' family – is to "*do the will of my Father in heaven*". That's what it all boils down to – the decision to obey God and trying to follow what he wants.

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### **Questions for discussion**

1. Try to put yourself in the position of one of Jesus' family (try hard to ignore all that you know about Jesus that they didn't). How would you have reacted to Jesus? In particular, how would you have reacted to what he says in *vv48,49*?
2. Why do you think we have elevated the family to such a prominent position in our culture? Is it biblical?
3. Being part of Jesus' family involves "*doing the will of the Father in heaven*". How can we discern what is God's will for us?
4. In what ways might taking seriously Jesus' words here affect out home life? our church life?
5. Is there anything that particularly strikes you about this story? Why? And what are you going to do about it?