

# RELATIONSHIPS IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

MICHELLE VASS

WHEN DAVID hears of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, he expresses his profound grief in a lament—Saul and Jonathan, loved and lovely! How many people around our world today continue to mourn the loss of family and friends in war, people who also were loved and lovely. We are not spared this grief experience of David's.

David grieves especially for Jonathan, his most dear and loyal friend. He is stricken, desolate. He calls Jonathan his brother, and states that Jonathan was, 'Very dear to me you were, your love to me more wonderful than the love of a woman.' Interestingly in this deep friendship, he describes a relationship that has characteristics of both friendship and familial ties.

In a brief snippet from Mark's gospel, (3:20, 21) we are given a picture of Jesus' relatives so upset with him entertaining a huge crowd at home, that they are convinced he is out of his mind. Sometimes this is taken to be a reflection on the cost of discipleship, that one must leave all, including family for there to be a wholehearted commitment to God. It can seem as though family is not as important.

Saying someone is out of their mind is strong language. There may be links with the subsequent reference to the parable Jesus speaks of just after this, questioning how Satan drive out Satan, and what happens when a kingdom is divided against itself. Further on in this chapter, Jesus' mother and brothers come and Jesus shows them no special treatment in saying, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Jesus' way of loving all regardless of whether they are in the family circle or not seems crazy to his relatives.

I wonder if in these little snippets of what are actually quite dramatic scenes, Jesus is actually stressing just how important family is to kingdom living. After all, isn't family where we learn how to grow up, how to give and take, where we learn our faith, where we are supposed to learn how to love? Look too at the way in which Jesus comes to speak of his relationship with God—a God as Father, so dear he calls him by the intimate term, Abba. For Jesus, this is the way to describe the relationship all should have with God in following God's will. It is to be a close, deep friendship with all the overtones of the strong blood, bonds of family.

This gospel scene reminds me of my own experience as a parent and how as parents we learn to not just let go of our children but share them in a wider setting of family. I have two young adult children who both grew up passionate about their hobbies. My son was an Irish dancer, and my daughter a swimmer. When they began competing in their respective fields in local competitions, they would run off the stage or jump out of the pool and coming running over to family for hugs and accolades and to share the excitement of their performance.

Then as they became more competitive and moved up to district, then state, then national and even international competition, this little ritual changed. Now when the event was over, they would go straight to the coach, then to their team and friends and then last but not least to waiting family. All parents know they must let go of their children, and so they should. But I suspect that this is not just about letting go. There is something else going on here. The family they belong to is being expanded, stretched. They don't just belong to this little



Michelle Vass is the Director at St Mary's Towers Retreat Centre. Previously she spent 16 years with the Marist Brothers (Marist College Canberra) in Ministry and Faith Formation of staff and students.

birth family any more. The family now includes, the club, other families, and even other clubs and their families. We even used to joke that my son's dancing teacher was actually his second Mum. Handing our children over, or sharing them with others, coaches and friends, enlargens not only the world of the child but also of the whole family.

I have a sense that Jesus is trying to make the point that the family relationship is so important that the strong bond of family ties is meant to be extended to all in the kingdom. Jesus is so one with the will of God that not even family objections based on a narrow and exclusive understanding can deter him from living out his mission of welcoming all. Kingdom living then is meant to see all in this extended view of family; as close as Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely, so close, in such deep friendship.

Isn't this the friendship Jesus speaks of when he says, "I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" Jn 15:15.

We see the face of God in our dearest friends. I hope you have such a friend and even more than that, I hope you are such a friend to others.

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