

Psalm 55:22-23 & John 18:12-13 A family affair – Caiaphas

Now, can I just begin today with a slight note of correction about last week's talk? Someone, who shall remain nameless, spoke to me after the service and said, "Peter would not have been tempted to marry the servant girl because he was already married. We know that because we read in the Bible that Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law." And that's a good point, so I said to the person (who shall remain nameless), "Look, maybe Peter's had a smart-alec wife who picked holes in his sermon over Sunday lunch and his eye wandered a bit!"

But in all seriousness, yes Peter was married, but we don't know anything about his marriage other than he had a mother in law, it may have been that Peter's wife had died which was why he was at liberty to spend three years on the road with Jesus. And even if she was still alive, there is nothing to say that he wouldn't have sadly been tempted to join the band of Christian leaders who, over the years, have had their heads turned and their commitment to Jesus compromised by a pretty face.

Those theories, last week, as to why Peter denied Jesus were just supposition and not to be taken too literally, but the underlying lessons were there for us to take note of and take action on. And can I just say that I'm really pleased when you spot mistakes in my talks because it means that you are listening to them, thinking about them and reading your Bibles too, so keep it up.

Well, let's turn to this week's talk.

Someone once said that the family is a social unit where the father is concerned with parking space, the children with outer space, and the mother with closet space, but families are much more complex than that.

Even the best, most stable and well adjusted group of people tied together as a family unit have their faults, weaknesses, foibles and secrets.

Of course we all know that families can take things to extremes – our television stations love a good drama centred upon a wicked family full of power, division, greed and envy; Dallas, Dynasty, East Enders, Heroes and so many others have thrived upon the disharmony and destruction wrought by families at war with themselves and yet there can be families where the drive to succeed actually pulls all the members together into a unit which grasps hold of and maintains a stranglehold on power.

As a Spanish proverb puts it; a family where “An ounce of blood is worth more than a pound of friendship.” Such a family was that of Annas.

Now, this morning our character involved with the cross of Christ is Caiaphas; the high priest, but to understand Caiaphas we actually need to meet his father-in-law – Annas.

Annas had also been the high priest in Jerusalem; a post which had originally been for life but when Herod the great came to power (the Herod who had been around when Jesus was born) he changed things and introduced a new system where the high priest was appointed or dismissed at will – to be exact, his will.

Then when Judea became a Roman province the Roman governors kept the new system going. So it was that in AD7 Annas was appointed high priest. Now perhaps he thought that he might hold on to the post until he died, but suddenly, only seven years later, a new governor arrived and decided to put his man in charge so Annas found himself out of a job – technically.

Now, it's not fair to say that Annas' family had an exclusive claim on the position of high priest, but over the following 60 years all four of Annas' sons and Caiaphas, one of his sons-in-law, all held the title of High Priest and those non-family members who interspersed them and shared that honour were quickly deposed and replaced.

In fact the Jewish historian, Josephus puts it like this; "They say that this [Annas] was most fortunate because he had five sons, and it happened that they all held the office of high priest to God, and he himself had enjoyed that dignity a long time before."

Very diplomatic language from Josephus because it seems fair to say that there was a substantial amount of nepotism going on in the temple – now, our word "nepotism" actually comes from the Latin "nepotes" meaning "nephews" and originated in the medieval period when the Pope gave his illegitimate children – or "nephews" as they were known – prominent jobs.

So why was the Annas family so keen to hang onto the post of high priest? Well, let me tell you, things have changed a little in the fellowship of God's people since the days of the temple, certainly on the financial front. You see a bit of work has been done on calculating what the high priest earned and apparently in today's terms it was an annual figure of about £9.8million per annum – just a little more than the archbishop of Canterbury earns!

And that was actually the entry level income, just like our beloved bankers there were all sorts of extras and bonuses on top, so, you see, it was well worth Annas' family maintaining its powerful position. And it seems that even when the next generation were the figure heads, Annas was still the ultimate power, hence John tells us in his Gospel that when Jesus was arrested;

“...the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year.” (John 18:12-13)

So, you begin to see how everything is sewn up? Jesus doesn't just have to deal with the high priest, but with his powerful family and empire and this is the danger - when families stop looking beyond themselves the inward focus can become so great that selfishness and corruption slips in. It even happened amongst Jesus' own disciples; remember James and John and their mother?

Mark simply records the request to sit at Jesus' right and left in glory as coming from James and John, but Matthew (ch.20) tells us that their mother was also involved in the request to Jesus. What a powerful family the sons of Zebedee could become if only she could get them in the right place at the right time, after all, it's not what you know, it's who you know.

So, overbearing families can even be a problem in the Christian church by behaving in an unChrist like manner. And it is an unChrist-like manner because Jesus' as the Son of God – the son of the most powerful father, never lorded it over people did he? He is the son of the Most High God, part of the greatest dynasty the universe ever has, or ever will see, but didn't exploit that privilege.

As Paul puts it to the Philippians; “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!”
(Philippians 2:3-8)

Can you see the enormous difference there between the family of Annas and the family of God? Jesus humbled himself whilst Annas exalted himself. Jesus became a servant to all whilst Annas became a master of all he surveyed. Jesus was obedient to God even to the point of submitting to the cross whilst Annas’ son-in-law Caiaphas gave the orders and condemned Jesus to the cross so that he could remain on the throne of his own life.

And we are called, not to be like Annas or Caiaphas, but to be like Jesus – that chapter in Philippians begins, “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose...Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus”.

Fundamentally, we are called to be a family which operates not like the Petrelli family in Heroes or the Ewing’s family in Dallas or the Mitchell family in East Enders or the Annas family in 1st century Jerusalem, but rather we are to operate as the family of God.

Turn to Matthew 12:49-50 and you will see that, if you follow Christ, then you are a member of God’s family, “Pointing to his disciples, [Jesus] said, Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

So, if you follow Jesus then you are not servants to sin any more – John chapter 8 makes it clear;

you are members of God's family, but being part of God's family comes with a responsibility towards one another. In his letter to the Galatians Paul urges us; "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." (Gal 6:9-11)

Now hang on a minute, haven't I just condemned nepotism? Doesn't this sound a bit like Masonic back scratching? You know, make sure you're only giving jobs to the church members? Well, no. Notice that this is not a corrupt favouritism, instead it is simply a right attitude towards people; care and compassion for those in need, not partiality and preference.

Remember, we heard in our epistle reading that God condemns corruption, "you, O God, will bring down the wicked into the pit of corruption; bloodthirsty and deceitful men will not live out half their days." So unlike Annas, Caiaphas and the medieval Popes we should never turn the church family into a place of nepotism and self serving greed.

However, as we come to the end of today's talk let me flag up one more danger for the family. Caiaphas and his father-in-law were too keen to keep things in the family, but some of the Pharisees had gone too far in the other direction and used religion as an excuse to abandon theirs, dedicating to God all the money and time that they would have spent on caring for family – it sounded pious, but it was just a cop out.

So if we are ever tempted to replace our responsibility to our earthly families by claiming a higher calling to our church families then God's Word is quite clear; Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees should be enough (Mark 7:10-13), but Paul leaves us in no doubt either when he writes to Timothy and says,

“If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” (1 timothy 5:8)

Listen, we tread a difficult line. On the one hand we are not to worship the family and slip into the mindset of Caiaphas and his family. Caiaphas was no longer acting as a true high priest, he was under the thumb of his father and he was more interested in worshipping money and power than he was in worshipping God.

Because of that he became prepared to twist the rules to suit him; the ends justified the means; it was illegal for the council to sit on the eve of a festival (but Caiaphas called them together the night Jesus was dragged before them), the council should have met in the chamber of hewn stone, but Caiaphas had moved them into his home, his surroundings, his power base. Cases such as Jesus' had by law to be heard in the day and then it was required that there be at least a day between the trial and the sentencing, but Jesus was tried and sentenced in the same night. And a conviction could only be secured on the testimony of two witnesses who agreed but, as we have seen, that law also was flouted by Caiaphas in case of Christ.

No, Caiaphas was part of a family whose own self-interest had driven it to corruption and a belief that it was above the law. But whilst we are to steer away from setting our families on such unhealthy pedestals, neither are we to solely focus on things of a religious nature using that as an excuse to abandon our unbelieving or difficult families.

So, how do we strike that balance? Well, as we have seen, it is to follow the example of Jesus who served God sacrificially and he did so not just to save those who were already God's family – the Jews.

But then again he didn't die on the cross to start afresh, forming a new family by only saving the Gentile non-Jews. Jesus died on the Cross and rose again to draw all who believe in him into God's family, because Jesus is not ashamed to call any of us his brothers.

So that means that as members of God's family, we must honour him alone, never seeking to serve our own interests or the interests of our families at the expense of others, but we must also honour God by caring for our earthly families too –

remember that as Jesus hung on the cross dying an agonising death, his concern was for his family and he spoke to John, the disciple who had so eagerly desired a place at Jesus' right or left and instead of glorious power and the Lord gave him the precious charge of caring for Mary, his own mother.

Take a look around; this is your family – the family that you will spend all eternity with, the family you share the same heavenly father with. Are you loving your earthy family correctly and are you loving your spiritual family correctly and are you allowing them to love you back because true, real, godly love will not allow sin; envy, greed, selfishness and corruption to grow there as well.

As Jesus commanded his disciples at the last supper, so we, as his brothers and sisters, are challenged when he says; "A new command I give you: Love one another.

As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

Then we will have good and godly family relationships.

Amen