

God's Family; the Church

When God rescues us, He doesn't just rescue us *from* things – sin, guilt, shame, hopelessness, judgement; He rescues us *to* things as well; future Hope, peace, purpose and freedom.

One of the other things He rescues us to is Family.

When He saves us, He adopts us and becomes our Heavenly Father. We are promised we will have a share of inheritance – we belong to Him.

And as God is our Father, we become part of His family – related to everyone else who has Him as their Father too.

When I surrendered my life to God, several years ago, it was enough for me to not be carrying round a load of guilt any more – it was enough for me not to fear death and judgement any more – it was enough for me to begin to understand that God wasn't angry with me - He loved me.

But what I hadn't expected was that all of a sudden, I was part of a huge family. And it was mind-blowing that this shy little 16 year-old who had no confidence, all of a sudden had hundreds of people treating me like a brother or a son.

And as I came to understand more about God being my Father, I came to understand too that His People were now my People too – I belonged to a Family, because I and every other follower of Jesus has the same Father.

And as I have been to different places in the world and have met Believers from different places in the world, even when we haven't been able to understand each others' languages.

- Romania
- Turkey
- Many people I have met from many backgrounds in Birmingham.

It has been one of the joys of my life to meet Believers in different nations, and you don't share a word of the same language, but you feel completely at home and accepted and you know you have everything in common and would give your lives for each other.

And I have been able to recognise something of a 'family likeness' in the way people have behaved and cared.

And even without words you recognise you are family.

If you met my dad and my uncle and my cousin, you might notice that we all have similar eyes; often people say that Callum and Finlay look like me – they're very blessed!

And it's no surprise, because genetically there are similarities.

When we become followers of Jesus, our physical appearance may not change, but there is a complete change inside – spiritually and a 'legal' change in our status. We belong to someone else.

Adoption

The Bible says this:

...For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love *he predestined us to be adopted as his sons* through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will (Ephesians 1:4-5)

Adoption is when you take a child with no family, and legally take him to be part of your family – to treat him and see him as your own flesh and blood with the same legal status as any natural children. And if you adopt someone, in British Law – and every other legal system in the world, you can never 'unadopt' or disown the child – it's permanent.

And when we come to faith, what is happening is our adoption into God's Family; He takes us, legally, unbreakably as His own, and calls us His Children.

And amazingly, Jesus came and introduced us to God as our Father; He trained and taught and invited us to address The Most High God – the Creator; the Holy One; The King of Kings and Lord of Lords – as "Abba" Father.

Up until then no-one had dared to even think like that – the closest even the Old Testament gets is to talk about God being like our Father or treating us as a Father (Jeremiah 3:19, Malachi 2:10)

But now when we pray we are to say "Our Father..."

And Jesus told us parables like the Prodigal Son to allow us to understand that even if we've dishonoured our Father and run away and sinned in every way we can think of and ended up wallowing in uncleanness and filth, completely bankrupt; even then, our Father will run to meet us and restore us and bring us back to our honoured seat at the family table – because He loves us as a Father.

And He said that even though we're evil, we can give good things to our children, but our Heavenly Father is perfect – and He's a Perfect Father – and so He gives to us according to who He is.

Rebirth: “Born of God”

But God's Work of making us His own is even deeper than that; in John 1 it says this:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. **Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.** (John 1:1-13)

This passage is a mystery – revealing something that is beyond us and too amazing for us to fully understand – but what it says is that God has given us the **right** to become His children – not just in the legal sense of adoption, but also by re-birth into His Family

So our family line no longer depends on natural human descent – a husband's will or human decisions to have children.

This seems to say that we become God's children by something more than adoption.

So when we turn to Him, we are brought into a whole new Family line.

If we are adopted into a family, we'll pick up family habits and opinions and some family characteristics from our new family; but when God adopts us, something even deeper happens and we become part of His Family spiritually with a new spiritual DNA.

And as we grow in Him, we look more like him:

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being **transformed into his likeness** with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Whatever background or culture you're from, right round the world, one of the things we all have in common is that Family is important.

But around the world there are very different understandings and expressions of Family.

In the West – 'family' had been eroded as people have moved away from home. A few generations ago, people grew up and lived in the same town or village as their extended family, if not the same street or the same house. And different generations cared for each other in the family.

Over the last few generations, what people have valued as their close family has reduced to being husband, wife, children, with parents, grandparents aunts and uncles being called 'the extended family'

And even this smaller understanding of family has been damaged and reduced because of the rise in divorce.

In the East families are generally understood as being much wider – covering generations, honouring parents and elderly relatives well and there's a bigger sense of belonging to your family.

But in the East as well as the West, it can be just as broken, with some family members treated very badly – this is something we have come across a lot in Birmingham

The danger is that people don't want to bring shame on their families, so everything looks lovely from the outside, but inside there can be lots of problems and pain and abuse and division; it's just better hidden.

So we all know about the ideal of Family, but in reality it sometimes doesn't live up to it in our experience.

And this can actually make us afraid of God as our Father and can stop us opening up and trusting and loving our Church Family.

But for all Believers, East and West, there's only one Father and only one Family; and so although we look different and have different cultures, God has a plan for how He wants His Family to be.

God is passionate about His children being in unity; He loves it when His children forgive one another as He has done to us – because then we're living like our Father.

He loves it when we lay down our lives and serve one another – because that's what His family do!

He loves it when we love one another with purity and care and compassion – because that's what His family is like!

What we want to do over the next few weeks in this series is to look at our lives and measure them against what our Father says in His Word about what He wants His Family to be like – and my prayer is that we all get more in line with His Plan for Family.

It is an amazing, unique thing which no other faith dares to claim to call God our Father.

There is a book by a wealthy Pakistani woman called Bilquis Sheikh who was brought up as a Muslim and then Jesus revealed Himself to her in a series of dreams. She began to follow Jesus and came to realise that God is her Father – an unthinkable thing for a Muslim. In Islam people talk about the 99 beautiful names for Allah; none of them is “Father”

The book she wrote is called “I dared to call Him Father”

In it she says this:

“Oh Father, My Father, Father God, hesitantly I spoke His Name aloud. I tried different ways of speaking to Him... Then, as if something broke through for me I found myself trusting that He was indeed hearing me, just as my earthly father had always done. “Father, Oh my Father God!” I cried with growing confidence. My voice seemed unusually loud...but suddenly that room wasn’t empty any more. He was there! (p.48)

No other faith knows God as Father, so no other faith has the understanding of being a family.

In Islam, the faithful Muslims around the world are known as the “Ummah” That means “nation/community”

In Sikhism the faithful Sikhs are known as the “Sangat” That means “association/company”

In Christianity, Christians who know God as our Father are known as “Family” – that means family!

And if we understand it, this makes a huge difference to our lives as Christians.

Hebrews says this:

Both the one who makes men holy (talking about Jesus) and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. Heb 2:11