

The Surrogate family of Jesus. – 4800 words

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²⁵ Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: ²⁶ “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Lk 14v25-27

²⁹ “Truly I tell you,” Jesus said to them, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God ³⁰ will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.” Lk 18v29-30

Families

There is an ancient proverb which goes “I will fight my brother, but **together** we will fight you”.

In one large youth group I helped run, I had a brother and two sisters who were always arguing and putting each other down, but the moment some-one else said something about any of them, even it was just to agree with a sibling insult, all three would unite and come down on the adversary like a verbal ton of bricks ! Family rivalry and family loyalty and often different sides of the same coin.

What about your family. How have the dynamics played out in recent years. Any big rows. Any sacrificial love shown for each other? Perfect family ? No, every family seems to be a complex mix of relationships, love and hate, loyalty and sometimes betrayal or estrangement. What if the family has never had anything to do with church, and not heard anything about Jesus except in nativity plays, then some-one comes home one day and declares they have become a Christian, and following Jesus is the most important thing to them now? How is that going to change the home dynamics?

If you pull out from the Gospels , certain scriptures about families particularly Jesus’ family then it would be easy to jump to the conclusion that he has little time for them. But we need to dig a bit deeper to see what is really going on beneath these verses.

The family of Jesus

Mary and Joseph had a large family, at least 4 brothers (we have names for James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas , Mt 6v3) and a number of sisters for which we have no names. He grew up in the small village of Nazareth in Galilee, and from the little we know, he was a loving well behaved child, growing strong, full of wisdom and blessed by God. We have one incident at age 12 when on the extended family annual pilgrimage he got accidentally left behind in Jerusalem and was found asking questions of the Jewish leaders in the temple. This would be like a 12 year old today found debating constitutional law at a large solicitors firms. When his parents told him off for getting lost. He replied that they should have known he could be found in ‘His Fathers house’. They didn’t know that, and didn’t understand what he meant. He went home with them where he is obedient to his parents, and continues to grow in wisdom and favour with God. But his family did not grow in understanding of who he was and what his mission was to be. Probably skilled in both carpentry and stone-masonry, he may have commuted to the nearby city of Sepphoris for work, but to his family and everyone else he was simply Jesus of Nazareth. He may have been a bit different, and particularly in tune to God, but he was still one of their family.

Ingroups and Outgroup

A common perspective then and now, is that the World is split in two, those for us (the in-group), and those against us (the out-group)! So back then, the primary in-group was your household, your extended family and your friends. In-group members expect from each other loyalty, courtesy, and to go to great lengths to help each other. This courtesy is not extended to people outside your in-group. However the boundaries are fluid, and by inviting some-one to eat with you was a way of bring a stranger into your in-group, which was why it was such a big deal for the religious opponents of Jesus when he ate with tax collectors and sinners !

But it wasn't quite that simple, because you would be a part of a much bigger in-groups. So the Judean people, had 3 regions Galilee, Perea, and Judea, and those living there were known as Galileans, Pereans or Judeans. Confusing as it names the people of the region and of the country. So growing up, the in-group of Jesus would have probably been his family and most if not all the people in his small village of Nazareth, yet they would also identify with the bigger Galilean in-group when facing opposition from a different region, and yet as a nation under attack or occupation, they would all identify together as Judeans against say the Romans. In fact for them, everyone outside of their faith was seen as a single out-group collectively known to them as 'Gentiles'.

The squabbling siblings in my youth group who united together when one was criticized by a family outside plays this out well. We see it also in the Gospel of Mark, when the Pharisees came to warn Jesus to leave a place because Herod was on to him, and wanted to kill him (Luke 13v31). He might be a troublesome Galilean Rabbi challenging their customs, but at that stage in his ministry they still saw him as one of their Judean in-group.

First century families (p289)

So the most important in-group was that of the extended family. Each first century Jewish family member is embedded and invested in the family unit, socially and psychologically. Their identity was as one, you rise or fall as a family. It was essentially a producing unit, mostly agricultural, unlike our own Western families which are mostly consumers. If they lost a member of family due to marriage, you lose some capacity so then some compensation or dowry for the bride was required.

The honour or shame of the whole family was determined by every family member. If one stepped out of line, a male made a dishonourable purchase or a daughter committed adultery, then it would have costly implications to the whole family unit. If a family was shamed in this way it would impact who the family women could marry and who might trade with you, or who would eat with you or converse with you etc.

To lose connection from your family, meant you lost the honour status that was attributed to your family, but also your extended family provided your networks for religious practice, for socialising, for learning and for earning. If you left the family, you left behind these vital networks and the family land.

Jesus was a fully integrated part of his family until he left home and moved to Capernaum at 30, which would have been regarded as a mature age due to their much shorter life expectancy. Noting, that people only normally left their homes once a year for the pilgrimage then His leaving his family and village was probably frowned on by everyone in Nazareth. His new life-style would soon stretch the family bonds further, as his priorities changed. He was about to build himself a new home, a coalition and a new family.

Forming the Jesus Faction

So at the start of his ministry, Jesus arrives in Capernaum and builds a new in-group. It is easy to see how by preaching powerfully in the synagogue, then inviting those he met to eat with him that a charismatic personality like Jesus could soon establish this network of friends outside of his own family. But he was

building something bigger than just a localised in-group. He would draw in people from across different in-groups to build a type of 'coalition' around the support to acting out his 'Kingdom of God' teaching. A coalition is defined as a group formed of different organisations or people who agree to act together usually temporarily, to achieve something. We see political parties do this today to achieve something specific.

One type of 'coalition' is a 'faction' which is focussed on a central person, that maintains the loyalty of a core group. Factions share a 'common goal or purpose' but beyond the core group, the membership can be quite fluid with comings and goings. John the Baptist with his inner core of disciple was a faction out in the desert calling people to seek forgiveness for their sins. Jesus follows this pattern and recruits young men into his in-group, and then invites some of them to be in his factions core group, his own disciples starting with the fishermen, Peter, Andrew, James and John and the toll collector Matthew, all living in Capernaum. The Jesus faction grew in number, in popularity and in influence as it travelled around Galilee and Judea spreading a new message about the Kingdom of God, and doing many miracles.

So what we need to understand with Jesus is that against his cultural expectations, he left his family in-group in Nazareth, and established a new in-group of friends in Capernaum. By spreading his message more widely and performing miracles, he formed a coalition or faction of those that 'bought into' his message.

For **all** those that believed the message of Jesus, and acted on his words, they became part of this great coalition of new thought and practices, finding a new understanding of their God Yahweh, choosing to turn away from their old sinful habits, be completely forgiven, and start afresh with new rules for living in this new Kingdom way.

In this wider coalition, we see his in-group of disciples, that followed him around if not all the time, then from time to time. These are sometimes referred to as the 72. Twelve of the young men from his in-group were appointed into the core group of the Jesus faction coalition. For members of this elite group of selected disciples, we now call the apostles, more was given, but more was required, and the cost of membership for them was high, which we will see later.

Jesus Surrogate Family (p335)

No longer having daily interactions with his birth family, he instead now has a 'surrogate family'.

Anthropologists, those who study human behaviour, call the 'surrogate family' a 'fictive kin group'. This is a bond based not on blood line or marriage, but a coming together with a unity based on religion, cultural background, or friendships. Ghetto street gangs provide this for young man without a supportive family. Immigrants to a country often form such groups to help support each other in what can be a new and strange environment often hostile to the new arrivals.

Just as the birth family did, the surrogate family now provide the vital networks you need. So back then it was the family who provided your networks for religious practice for socialising, for learning and for earning.

New family make-up?

But who gets to be a part of this heavenly surrogate family of Jesus:-

Is it his core followers, his apostles? Yes, and as they grow closer to Jesus in understanding, we see them empowered to emulate him, spreading the good news, healing the sick and casting out demons (e.g. Luke 9 v1-6).

Is it his wider in-group of following disciples? Yes – We read in Lukes gospel that he appointed another 72 of his faction, to go out in pairs, to all the towns and villages, and they performed the same miracles as

Jesus and the apostles (Luke 10v1-17). So they were part of his surrogate family.

But what about the rest of the coalition? What about everyone else who is not in these inner in-groups, i.e. those with looser ties to Jesus, but still are following his teachings and acting on them? Surely they can't too all get the same privileges as the inner core group that are with him 24/7? Or can they?

Let us at last turn to our passage for the answers

Jesus is falsely accused ?

²⁰ Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. ²¹ When his family^{bl} heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." ²² And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons." Mk 3v20-22.

There has always been Fake News ! Back then there was no newspapers. 97% could not read or write. They had no phones. There was no internet but there was the Gossip-Net ! The primary means of communication was via the gossip network, and was primarily via the women who were the monitors of social behaviour and would report to each other any observed deviations from the norm which might be cause of bringing honour for good deeds or shame to a family for unacceptable behaviour. Older children frequented both the male and female zones so could bring news too. Negative news of Jesus comes over the gossip network. It was concerning enough for Mary (now in her mid 40s) and the brothers in their teens and twenties to undertake the days walk of 20 miles from Nazareth to Capernaum.

Estranged from their eldest son, it was important to find out best they could how his new mission, doing Gods work, was being received. Was it being accepted or rejected. Would it bring honour or shame to the family. The ministry was actually going really well. This new Rabbi on the scene in Capernaum and beyond, was being recognised as a great prophet, perhaps even the promised Messiah. It didn't matter to his audience where he came from or what his old occupation was, he gained his new honour status by the quality of teaching, and the miracles he performed.

However the news which reached his family in Nazareth was not good. Perhaps it had been overheard from a respected Pharisee, who opposed the message of Jesus. There were reports of crowds around him all the time, such that some days he does not even eat. Reports that he is mixing with the low-lives with prostitutes and tax-collectors. Reports that he is operating in the power of the devil, casting out demons with Satan's permission.

Perhaps they left it for a while, hoping reports would get better, but the view already being formed in Nazareth, was that the son of Joseph and Mary, brother of James etc, was acting in a deviant way above his station in life, without the ascribed honour that allowed such behaviour, such as the very popular John the Baptist had enjoyed before Jesus. It may have started affecting the way the other villagers were now treating Marys family, or at least threatened to do so.

They came to the conclusion that the time had come to travel to Capernaum, and reign Jesus back in, bring him back down to earth, to behave more like he was expected to. Mark states that 'when his family heard about Jesus, they went to **take charge** of him for they said 'he was out of his mind' (Mk 30v21). No doubt, by taking the brothers of Jesus with her, his most important family bonds, this show of strength, would persuade Jesus to change. He would obediently comply just like he did 18 years earlier in Jerusalem.

So his family travel to his new home in Capernaum to take charge, and change his course. In their eyes, it was essential for the reputation and well-being of Marys family, including Jesus himself, especially for Jesus who seemed to need saving from himself !

The family can't get near.

³¹ Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. ³² A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." (Mk 3v31-32)

On arrival, after the days walk Mary and her sons are expecting to see Jesus straight away. They find his house easily enough, as that is where everyone was, but they can't get in because of the crowds.

So they send the message into the home. We are his family, his mother and his brothers. We have come all the way from Nazareth and need to speak to him now. The crowd pass on this exciting news and the buzz reaches Jesus. Your mother is here, and your brothers. They have been looking for you.

The expectation of the crowd would naturally be that he would stop what he was doing, and go to be with his close family. Surely that is how an honourable son would behave ?

Jesus calls out his surrogate family

Jesus is in full swing. In his parable of the sower, the most successful sower, the one that see the big harvest, is the one that sows into good soil. Their keen attentive ears and open hearts are good soil, and he is not wasting the opportunities to teach more Gospel truths into this fertile soil. He is not about to stop for anyone, not even his Mother. Instead he uses the opportunity to sow another new truth into their lives.

³³ "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. ³⁴ Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Mk 3v33-34

Wow, Jesus is now declaring them all as his surrogate family. They are now the ones that he has the strongest ties to.

Interestingly, the last meal with Jesus had with his closest followers, his disciples was the Passover meal, that he had so much desired to have with them. More than any other meal, this was a family meal, a bit like our Christmas dinner, and to have it with his disciples was recognition in a deep way, that these men were family to him.

Hears and acts

This important teaching of Jesus, is in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Whilst Mark gives the fullest context, Luke adds an important statement of clarification from Jesus.

"My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." Lk 8v21

It is not just the people packed like sardines in his Capernaum home that are part of his surrogate family,. It is them, and anyone else who hears Gods word, this gospel message of Gods kingdom. But not just **hears** it, but then puts what he or she has heard into **practice**. Don't just hear it, and speak it, but do it. You have to walk the talk. But that was true already for those who would have been regarded as part of this great coalition, this great Jesus faction. Here in front of him, were already those that were obedient to his reaching.

So the incredible teaching was that every member of his coalition was not just seen as part of his 'faction' but part of his 'family'. He is adopting all of those that listen to him, and follow his teachings, into his 'surrogate family'. Not just the 12 apostle, and not just the wider group of disciples, but **everyone** who hears him and acts on his words, everyone who identifies with his coalition.

Why should his followers put Jesus first, over their families?

Why should the Jesus followers put him first, especially if they have a strong close family network.

Interestingly Luke links our passage with the miracle of calming the storm. Jesus is asleep in the boat, a mighty storm blows up, the disciples fighting the elements for their lives, feel they are about to die, and wake up Jesus, who immediately calms the storm. It is a well known miracle, but here we see Jesus demonstrate to his core group, that Their blood families were no longer any use to them at sea in this storm. He is the only one that could ultimately save them. He is the one to hope in, to trust in, to follow, to emulate, to put first.

Every one in the coalition benefits. This is extra-ordinary because in its make-up, unlike birth families, it transcends all of the normal divisions on class, gender, education, and wealth etc. It sets a blue-print for Christian communities to follow.

So for example if you were a widow or another poor or marginalised person, you now had a surrogate family that would include you, look out for you and help you. This was very much a part of Jesus' teaching.

Soul Friends

Like the first followers of Jesus, we need to grow into the benefits of being part of Gods family. As we adapt to our surrogate family, we can discover that wherever we go in our own country or anywhere else in the world, we can meet new brothers and sisters in Christ, who show a surprising level of openness, acceptance and generosity towards. The binds we have in Christ go wide, but they can also go deep.

In the Christian Celtic tradition there was a gaelic phrase 'anam cara' which translates 'soul friend'. This is some-one who you can confess too, and reveal your hidden intimacies, some-one who can teach you, comfort you and give you spiritual guidance. It is a deep, trusting, and binding friendship with one with a spiritual dimension which could not be found outside of the family of God. The soul friendship is not even broken by death. Perhaps our British reserve stops us from seeking out such a person, or offering it ourselves to another. But soul friendship can be a wonderful benefit of being in the surrogate family.

Did Rabbi Jesus still love his blood family?

Jesus having given up his life-long work as an artisan and taking up the role of an itinerant Rabbi, he now had a new focus and many more people around him, but there is no evidence that he honoured his Mother and family any less than before. At the start of his ministry, presumably at one of his younger siblings weddings, he was called on his Mum to save the day by providing more wine from nowhere. A strange request to a son who was blessed by God, but to date had done nothing miraculous. He didn't feel it was quite the right time to show his hand in this way, and was perhaps thinking his heavenly Father would reveal this directly to him and not through his mother, but he honoured her anyway and turned several barrels of washing water into the equivalent of 750 bottles of the finest wine. Three years later, as he hangs naked at his crucifixion, he is heard

carrying for his mother Mary, who is at the foot of the cross, telling his disciple John to now treat her like his own mother. These two events would suggest there was nothing wrong with the love between him and his birth mother. A few weeks after Golgotha when Jesus had been resurrected and ascended to heaven, we see his mother **and** his brothers (Acts 1v14) gathering together with his apostles for prayer and fellowship, so were presumably also there when the Spirit came down on **all** the believers at Pentecost. The day they walked to Capernaum, none of this would have made any sense to them. But all the things his family did not understand during the 3 years of his ministry, they had resolved after seeing and understanding his death and resurrection.

I can't hate my own family !

As large crowds followed Jesus on his way to his final days in Jerusalem, he Jesus spells out the cost of following him and joining his faction, and it seems extreme !

Lk 14v26-27 ²⁶ **If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."**

First century Mediterraneans were very group oriented. That is where their identity was, not in the individual. Their primary group of belonging as we have seen is the extended family. In that culture love meant more about connecting and belonging to the group, than any passionate emotion. Hate, was the opposite, it was about detachment, disassociation from the group, more than it was about any feelings of repulsion. Jesus is saying that if you follow me then your primary connection is to me and my faction, our kingdom purposes. This may take priority over all the pulls and obligations placed on you by your birth family. It may even cost be putting your life at risk, which is what to 'carry your cross' meant.

For many Christians today who are honest with themselves, they can see that the needs and pull of their 'nuclear family' will oppose the needs of the global family, of God's family.

But why would those early followers even consider paying such a heavy cost to follow Jesus, what is the purpose of it and what was in it for them?

The cost of membership

To become a member of almost anything in life, there is a cost involved, it may be purely financial, or an expected level of commitment and effort, or both. What are **you** a member of, what do **you** subscribe to ? Now think, in each case, what does that membership cost you and require of you. I am a member of the AA road rescue service, my son is a member of the National Trust, I am a member of a Mission focused Prayer Group, I sometimes subscribe to Netflix to see good films. There are costs and benefits to each.

To join the Jesus faction, and be welcomed into the surrogate family, there was a cost to the disciples. It took precedence over loyalties to their blood-line family, and all the benefits and securities that they provided. We might see this as costly in today's societies, but it was more so in those days. This is why Jesus, highlights in his teachings, how difficult it is for the rich, whose focus is on their existing networks that are enabling the life-style of an elite person, with its securities, possessions and privileges.

Over the 3 years his faction was active, the bonds within his surrogate family, particularly in his core group, became stronger and stronger to the point they were convinced that each one would die for Jesus if needed.

The Great Cause

In 1900 the great antarctic explorer Earnest Shackleton placed this advert in London newspapers.. *Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success.*¹

The cost would be immediate and certain to successful applicants, whilst the rewards were future and uncertain. He was inundated with applicants ! The journey failed when the ship locked in ice ,and sunk 1000 miles from the nearest inhabitant. More than 14 months, later, and against all odds, Shackleton reached civilisation saving the lives of all 27 crew members.

Why suffer, and risk your life, **other** than for a great cause.

A cause so great that you don't let your family outside the door drag you away from sharing the kingdom of God to those with open ears and open hearts.

A cause so great that if the choice comes that you would choose it over the desires of your own family, over your own ambitions, and even to the ultimate – over your own life.

The cause is the kingdom of God, breaking through into our lives, becoming part of Gods family in this world and the next.

The Prize

For Shackleton's crew in the Endurance, even though their expedition failed, their obedience to his leadership and thus their ultimate survival, made them the stuff of legends; including his no.2 Frank Wild, Navigator Frank Worsley, Photographer Frank Hurley and even Mrs. Chippy the ship's cat. Films and books are still being made about them 100 years later, including one on Mrs Chippy's last voyage.

However the rewards for following Jesus on his mission to bring in the kingdom of God, and to set people free, are a much greater reward. Jesus makes this clear when he tells his disciples

²⁹ "Truly I tell you, no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God ³⁰ will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life." Lk 18v29-30

Paul adds to that in his letter to the Ephesians ⁵ ***God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure (Eph 1v5 New Living Translation)***

Then in his letter to the church at Rome. ***And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. (Romans 8v17)***

How amazing is it that you can be adopted into a family which has God the Father as its head, and where the gifts and privileges given to his son Jesus, can also be available to you as a family member.

Invitation

2000 years on, and Jesus is still looking for good soil to sow in the message of the kingdom of God. He will share that Gospel message through those of us who know him and love him. Those who sign up with our lives to love him and follow him. That was always the plan when he ascended to heaven, there has never been a plan B.

Where are the open hearts and attentive ears today? Jesus says to each and every-one. "Come".

"Come and Follow Me "

"Come and join my coalition, my Jesus faction'

"Come, join my surrogate family, be adopted by my Father in heaven, be a child of God, be a co-heir of the kingdom, with me, Jesus. I will be with you through my Spirit, and never leave you, in this world. and throughout eternity.

"Don't lose your affection and provision for your own family, but where there is conflict, **then** put me first, where there is a cost to pay, **then** pay it, where there is a sacrifice to make, **then** make it.

You are my mother and my brothers.

There are voices outside trying to distract you, drag you away from what God wants. Some of those voices may be your family members. Yet Jesus stands in front of you today, as an individual yes, but **also** as a church, your own collation of believers, and Jesus says directly to you today.

"Who is my Mother? Who are my brothers ? You are. Yes You are. You, who hear my word and act on it. You are my mother and my brothers. **Amen**