

Family belonging?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 9 June 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 3B

Contemporary Reading: *Coherence & Belonging* by Richard Rohr; Mark 3: 21-35

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Where, to what, and, perhaps most importantly of all, to whom do you, do we, belong? These are core questions at the heart of faith, and of life itself. Let me therefore begin with a little quiz question, to which those who know 1980s popular music may be able to respond. Who sang the following words? If it helps, think of it sung falsetto by a redheaded young man:

*You leave in the morning with everything you own in a little black case
Alone on a platform, the wind and the rain on a sad and lonely face
Mother will never understand why you had to leave
But the answers you seek will never be found at home
The love that you need will never be found at home*

The song is *Smalltown Boy*, sung by Jimmy Somerville, from the British synth-pop band Bronski Beat's album *Age of Consent*. It came out in 1984, at the height of Margaret Thatcher's political power, and, for folk like me – not least small town kids like me – it was emblematic both of protest against oppression and of the creative, joyous, expression of queer courage and change. Indeed, among other things, Bronski Beat also headlined '*Pits and Perverts*', a concert in London's Electric Ballroom to raise funds for the Lesbians and Gays support the Miners campaign: an event featured in the film *Pride*.

Smalltown Boy also reached number 8 in the Australian charts and it is but one symbol of the historical struggle which has led, finally this week, to a formal apology from the New South Wales government for the horrendous abuse and violence that has been inflicted on queer people, and not least on gay young men who were told, in no uncertain terms, that they did not belong. Yes, let us celebrate that! Today *Smalltown Boy* is a celebration of what was largely still a declaration not to be crushed, but to survive, and thrive. For as Jimmy Somerville sang:

*Pushed around and kicked around, always a lonely boy
You were the one that they'd talk about around town as they put you down
And as hard as they would try they'd hurt to make you cry
But you never cried to them, just to your soul
No, you never cried to them, just to your soul*

Soul power eh? As Jesus, another smalltown kid, taught, and showed, this is ultimately at the heart of any life-giving change. For it is where we find our true belonging. Belonging is so vital to our lives. In Maslow's famous hierarchy, belonging is found as the third level of five essential needs for human flourishing.

Recently however a number of thinkers have argued that belonging is even more important. So much of the struggles of our politics and culture are certainly tied up with the underlying search to belong. As we heard from Richard Rohr in our contemporary reading today,¹ we live in a world where, for so many people, the ideas of belonging in sacred coherence have been undermined.

No wonder then that so many struggle to find meaningful connection and mental and spiritual flourishing and that narrow tribal identities are so fraught and fought over. For however humans variously name it, when deep down sacred connection is lost, we are left with competition between atomised individuals.

It is not that we can simply step back into forms of belonging that worked in the past. That is the false mythical thinking of political popularism and fundamentalist religion. Cultures have to evolve. They cannot just be frozen or recalled without distortion and violence. Popularism and fundamentalism are however understandable cries of desperation at the loss of meaning, linked to the exaggerations of over-rationalism, individualism and advanced capitalism. If we are to find alternatives, they must involve new configurations, based on re-envisioned coherence and belonging.

Belonging does not always come easily. That is part of the message of the song *Smalltown Boy*. Not least for many queer people, but also for others, 'given' forms of home and family do not always lead to life: even the reverse. Home and family, true belonging, has sometimes to be found elsewhere. In the song, the injunction is clear: *Run away, turn away* the chorus repeats. There is choice and action involved in finding true belonging and flourishing, and it can often be very painful and costly. This is not to deny the wonderful ways in which 'given' homes and families, and our received cultures and identities, can also provide and nurture life. However, even the best of any 'given' home, family, culture, or identity cannot provide ultimate coherence and belonging. And this brings us to the heart of our Gospel reading today.

What do you make of this passage from Mark's Gospel? Among other things, it is a pretty devastating story of conflict between Jesus and his 'given' family! First off, the family come to restrain, or pull Jesus in line. People are saying Jesus is out of his mind. Did mother Mary and the brothers agree? At the very least, they appear embarrassed and shamed by Jesus. Jesus was not behaving according to their family, cultural, and religious values. Jesus was shameful and shaming: their small town boy gone wrong. So, what is Jesus' response?

'*Who are my mother and brothers?*', Jesus asks, and answers the question by looking away from their 'given' family to others, saying '*here are my mother and brothers*', and '*whoever does the will of God is my mother and brother and sister (my sibling)*.' Jesus, small town kid from Nazareth, has not only run away from home and the family. They have disowned family, not only publicly, but right up against and before them. In doing so, Jesus has also affirmed that ultimate life-giving belonging lies in God and with those who share in truly loving 'chosen' family.

How did we then get from this utterly subversive 'smalltown boy' Jesus to 'family first' religion and politics and supposedly divinely ordained 'family' values and 'lifestyles'?² '*Run away, turn away*' is Jesus' message here to others, and to us.

¹ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/coherence-and-belonging-2019-02-19/>

² One way into this is provided by Frey, Jörg. "'Family Values' in the Gospel Tradition." *Theology Today* 76, no. 3 (October 1, 2019): 209–16. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0040573619859021>

Run away, Jesus is saying, from the toxic values where you experience them in your families, in your cultures, in your faith communities, in your 'given' identities. Turn away from toxic belonging and choose life. Choose rather to belong to communities, to friendships, to deep and intimate relationships, which truly bring life. 'Cry' too, is small town boy Jesus' message: but it is a cry indeed to, and out of, your soul; a cry not simply out of pain and oppression, but for life and flourishing expression.

Now, of course, there are many more positive things to be said about 'given' family, culture and tradition in the wider New Testament and in Christian Tradition as a whole! Yet, in this, as in a number of other things, Mark's Gospel is perhaps revealing an original layer of faith which was later obscured by other concerns. For not only was Jesus clearly the very opposite of a poster boy for family values. Jesus also encouraged a radically different kind of community: one somewhat nearer to the 'chosen' families of queer and other marginalised people we may see today, and, in ages past.

Maybe this original layer of faith in Mark's Gospel helps explain some of the extra elements of scripture we find in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. For example, we might ask how far the birth stories about Jesus, only found in Matthew and Luke, were part of later attempts to rehabilitate the 'given' family of Jesus. Luke in particular also helps rehabilitate Mary, the mother of Jesus, encouraging a line of tradition especially developed in the Mariology of the Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions.

Meanwhile, Matthew's insertion of a genealogy of Jesus helps restore the fathers and forefathers whom Mark's Jesus manifestly ignores. Is this perhaps part of the rehabilitation of patriarchy early in Christian history? Significantly, John's Gospel, like that of Mark, also has little time for the 'given' family and culture of Jesus. For John, like Mark, is concerned to direct our attention to the divine challenge of Jesus to share in a new community: a new community built, as the Johannine tradition affirms, on the mutuality and relationships of friends, rather than of ordered family, and gendered, relationships, and on the power of deep intimate love, not blood identity.

Run away, turn away – choose life. This is the message of the small town kid Jesus when we encounter toxicity in our relationships. Cry instead to your soul: which is really another way of saying pray, deeply, and find your soul power. Seek God, the source of true life and love, and seek out lovers and friends in 'chosen' family.

Of course, if you can do that with those who are already given to you as blood related family or friends in your given faith or culture, so much the better. It is not that 'given' family, or culture, or nation, or faith, are bad things. All the positive elements in them which have been highlighted over the centuries remain hugely valuable. It is just that they are not themselves the ultimate source of belonging and flourishing. For as the old saying has it, '*be not proud of race, face, or place*'. True pride comes from the grace we receive in love: love, which knows no boundaries, and crosses every boundary. The choice can be hard - we know that – but the cost is worth it.

For, as Augustine of Hippo expressed it, in speaking, like Richard Rohr, of our true place of belonging, in God: '*our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.*'

In Jesus' name, Amen.