

And looking around at those sitting in a circle round about Him, Jesus said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother." Quite profound words, and they've always interested me because as a younger person we were not a close family. There were huge gaps between my brothers and sisters, in fact 19 years difference between the eldest and the youngest, and so my siblings and I weren't particularly close although, I am much closer nowadays to my sister and a bit closer towards my brother who is a lot older. But it was very different when we were younger and divided, and we didn't mix with my father's side of the family- don't ask me why, but we didn't. We very rarely mixed with the other side too. The only close ones to me were my grandmas and two spinster aunts. And so Jesus' statement about true kinship has always fascinated me, especially as I'd never really experienced it. I mean, I felt I had a loving a family but I didn't feel we were connected. And so, where is true kinship? I think this matters to people who maybe have difficult families, or little or no family, to realize the importance of friendship and profound relationships. Our family ties are not just blood ties, they should ideally be ties of friendship also, but this is not always the case.

And I came across four points which I've expanded on for true kinship, based on Jesus' statement. True kinship has to lie, I think in a **common experience**. In other words, where people have come through things together, like a tragedy as well as the joys, and where there's been somebody there all the time for you, someone very important to you. Also groups of people can have that sense of kinship. You've only to think of Martin Luther King Jr and the fight against segregation and inequality, and the way people were drawn together in common cause,, and referred to one another as brothers and sisters. Shared faith too gives us this sense of kinship in God's family - faith as an experience shared, struggled with, but yet remaining faithful to one another. That's what will give a common experience. Jesus called His apostles and disciples, His brothers and sisters, and this had a deep impact on the early Church, so much so that from the very beginning, it was fundamental to the understanding of what it meant to be Church. You'll see elements in the New Testament where people refer to one another as brothers and sisters.

And I think the second important ingredient for true kinship, which we can examine ourselves, to see if we've developed, is a **common interest**. Deep friendships are based around things that start with things like hobbies and sport and so on, things that bind people together; a common element. But ultimately, our common interest has to be God, but not any old God - we mean the God revealed by Jesus. I would say our faith in particular has got to be more than an interest, it's got to be a commitment. Interests do lead to commitments if you have common interests. So we could ask ourselves, as parish communities, as the Church of God, as the household of God, "Are we deeply committed to the God revealed by Jesus, and therefore deeply committed to one another.?"

And I think the third important thing, and it's a word we don't use now much, is a **common obedience**, as in listening and acting upon what is right. By obedience, I don't mean blind

faith and blind following. The disciples of Jesus were a mixed bunch, weren't they? The apostles. There were some extremists, zealots. There were people who were ordinary workmen and so on. They had different attitudes, dispositions, likes and dislikes, but their experience of the teaching or ideology of Jesus commanded a response. They found that necessary comradeship with each other, through Jesus and His teaching. I would say He became, after His death and resurrection, the ruler by which they measured the quality of their lives. We have to ask ourselves, "If we don't feel kinship with one another in the Church, am I really listening to the word of God and putting it into action in my life?"

And I think a fourth important ingredient is a **common goal**. People are bound together when they have a common aim. Just think about the branches of the military, how many soldiers or members of the military say they feel that they're in a bond, a brotherhood, a family. I must admit, I felt it when I went to theological college, at Ushaw, believe it or not. It was because we had a common purpose and it was a great binding force because you had an aim in the end, which was to be ordained. We had a joke about USHAW College, which I do have a sort of love for. It was in the middle of nowhere and was just full of crows, and even the crows went, "USHAW, USHAW."

[laughter]

..... and frightened you to death. However the common goal then, and aim, if you like, was and is our mission to witness to God in the world. To be true to Him outside the church building as well as inside.

So we have seen that there are four ingredients that increase our sense of kinship through faith. I came across a quote by HG Wells whom you will have heard of because of "War of the Worlds." He said that most people, usually listened to their neighbour's voice rather than God's voice. By that he was meaning we react more to, "What do other people think?" as opposed to, "What is God asking me to do?" We inately want to blend in, to not stand out, to conform to the society around us. That's what we mean by a tribal culture. And I think it's profoundly what Jesus was commenting about. He wasn't belittling His own family as such. He was attacking the tribal connections then and now that would marginalise God and put our own narrow interests first. This selfish idea is I think, what Jesus was challenging when he looked around said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother." To obey the will of God, through our reasoning and conscience, is to hear God's voice as louder and more urgent than that of society around us."



