

“How’s the family?”. I quite often ask this, especially when talking with people who I know have numerous children and grandchildren, especially when I can’t quite remember all their names. It can seem a simple and innocent question but it can also seem to make the assumption that the answer is easy and positive. We don’t all have families that are living happily ever after. Indeed, I wonder who could say that theirs is doing that. I know I can’t. Every person holds a story that encompasses pain and joy, broken places, scarred places and also healed places. Every family reflects that. As we have heard from Peter and from Courtney, for some, the reality of family is of struggle, violence, abuse, neglect that, without the right care, understanding and support, these things can be handed on to the next generation. Those stories are right on our doorstep and, when we dare open our eyes, we know are happening everywhere around this world.

It can be overwhelming, and is, if we look at it as individuals. It is not just abuse and neglect, financial or social stress that breaks things apart. It can be cultural and attitudinal differences, and there are plenty of those around us these days. Generational differences can be acute, especially across those who come from cultures where an Australian way of life challenging. Young people live with a very different culture around them than most of us here knew. The drug scene is complex and can lead to terrible consequences. It’s no wonder people can get lost. So many things contribute to people’s fragility. We hear more about mental illness. Mental breakdown is a heartbreaking thing for families to cope with and some can’t. I can put many faces to that statement from my time working as a mental health chaplain. Family life is changed forever with a diagnosis of

severe mental illness, be it something like schizophrenia or an eating disorder or anxiety and depression – whatever.

We hear, in Mark's gospel, how Jesus own family feared for him: "He is out of his mind", they said. That was indeed something to fear in a culture that equated such a statement with demon possession. And others were quick to want to label him as such. It's a convenient way we may all resort to, demonising those who are different, whose behaviour we don't like and which may seem to threaten the way we think things should be. While Jesus easily refutes this accusation by pointing out that Satan would hardly be casting out his own, he also makes clear that if a house is to be safe, then the strong man must be tied up, disempowered.

What we see here is that the negative things that can control us have to be seen for what they are and dealt with. That needs honesty and support. It is through the Holy Spirit, the power of love and liberty that we can do this. So we look to Jesus who was not swayed by the harsh talk around him, the demonization that he was subjected to, to find our way.

His way was to gather all those who sat around him, listening, paying attention, and making of them a new family based not on fear and division, but on inclusion and grace. He was widening the circle, expanding our notion of family. We need that. Not everyone has a family. Not everyone feels they belong anywhere or can be accepted anywhere. Think of new migrants, refugees, asylum seekers. Think of those who were abandoned as children or cast out as difficult teenagers. Think of those single parents, or people from broken relationships who feel they don't fit in. Think of those whose struggles with sexual identity makes them feel alienated. We often think of the church as our family, and we should, as long as the way

we define family makes room for all kinds of differences and doesn't just welcome those who are like us, as far as we can see.

So often it is the way we deal with difference that can define us: we can demonise or we can work really hard to listen and learn and maybe still disagree, but, through working together, make space for one another. The Uniting Church is being called to do this as we approach the General Assembly that will be discussing ways of responding to the referendum vote in favour of same sex marriage. 4 different proposals will be discussed, all worked on over a long time. We will not all agree. There is, and will be, deep emotion. But we can, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, face our own fears and reach out, even across the gulf of misunderstanding, and know that we are called together, in spite of our differences, to be a family of God.

As it has been said: "It is not our differences that divide us but our judgements". "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God." When we overcome our divisions, work through the inevitable challenges and make room for difference we find that Christ is in that space because that is what he did. In that space is joy and blessings we would never have anticipated. We may not know how to do it, but let us keep our hearts and minds open. Let us continue to seek to embrace within God's family, all those who desperately long to know what family can mean for them, and so to discover new ways of being. Let us look to Christ, in the love of God and the grace of the Holy Spirit.