

Julie Gittoes, member of the Commission, provides an overview of the biblical narrative of families and households, and draws out themes and questions.

When thinking about families and households - and how human beings flourish within them - we get drawn back to Scripture. In this blog, I want to do a couple of things: to give an overview of the biblical narrative; and to tease out the themes and questions in particular episodes.

In *Inspired* (2018), Rachel Held Evans explores the process of understanding the Bible as a fearless wrestling within community as we discern what's written for us if not to us. That means thinking about the text in relation to context - as well as drawing on tradition, reason and experience.

This wrestling is a Spirit-led exercise within which we find ourselves and learn God's ways with the world. On the one hand, the families, households and relationships we find in Scripture are honest about our propensity to misdirect desires or to wound others (in shorthand, "sin"); but God's propensity to love and heal is also made known to us (the work of salvation).

From Adam and Eve onwards we see disoriented desires and freedom turned to self; they face the unraveling of human relationships through violence. In Abraham and Sarah we see promise, hope, blessing and descendants - and the pain of Hagar's story and Isaac's binding. In Jacob and Joseph and his brothers we see the marriages, rivalries, grief, wrestling, penitence and restoration.



The Psalms speak of human experience - the sorrow of being like a lonely bird to the hope for a quiver full of children. Ruth draws us into marriage, widowhood, the hope of children and the kinship of ethnicity, religion, law or affection. The Prophets call us to prioritise the widow, the orphan and the alien; and liken a wayward people to unfaithfulness in marriage.

The Gospels speak of Mary's story: her engagement and reliance on her cousin. We read of siblings called to discipleship and fathers left at the nets; friendship with siblings at Bethany and the healing of a mother-in-law. The question is asked 'who is my mother?' but we also see mother entrusted to a beloved friend.

Paul works through the dynamics of marriage - when faith is and isn't shared. He explores the place of slaves and the kinship of adoption. His concern about the future and the end of times reframes the call to singleness. He writes of household codes and the fruit of the Spirit.

In all this, there is a pulse that beats through the stories: commandments of love of God, self and other; covenant commitments which are about fidelity and fruitfulness.

Within this narrative, here are some snapshots to reflect on:

**Families:** In Matthew 12, Jesus asks the creative and disruptive question of ‘who is my mother, sister, brother?’ The answer is to point to disciples - indicating the priority of whoever does the will of his Father. How might this extend the notion of family rather than eroding it? If households and families provide the context where we learn to honour God and each other, what are the expectations of such kinship bonds - for children, blended families and the elderly?



**Aging:** In Luke's Gospel, the stories of Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon and Anna, allow us to explore the place of those who are older in the domestic and religious realms. There are times of seclusion and times of public ministry. They embrace a new generation in different ways - in becoming parents themselves, or in seeing God's wider purposes at work in a young family's act of devotion. In each case, there is attentiveness and trust, words of promise and fulfilment. Salvation draws near in an intergenerational space.

**Marriage:** Part of the creation ordinance in Genesis chapter 2 is often interpreted as one man and one woman given in marriage (including the way it is picked up in Jesus' teaching on divorce). These words also offer wisdom and challenge about what it means to have a 'help-mate' in life - the importance of shared endeavours and not being alone. We might also consider what it means to be 'one flesh' - including Paul's image of the church as one body with many members. How does this shape our understanding of intimacy, embodiment and commitment to others?

**Singleness:** We will spend some or all of our adult life single as a result of choices, circumstances, callings. There will be things within and beyond our control - including changes to health or work. When Jeremiah is called to be a prophet, his youth is mentioned, without caveats or

expectations. Later, he is told not to marry or have children and in Jeremiah chapter 29, he writes about rebuilding a people. He is single and has a place in shaping society. How do we support and strengthen single-person households?



**Households:** In Acts we see a range of households. Some are led by well-resourced or high-status women as well as men; others include slaves, children, couples. Households serve as places of gathering for worship where there is welcome, disruption and embrace. One of the themes within the household formation is that of our longing for or desire to be with the other as a result of the Spirit's activity. If we talk about the fruit of the Spirit, might we talk about the fruit of our households - in their interconnectedness and diverse 'ways of holiness'?

This is the stuff of households, the fabric of family life, the development of social networks and God's kingdom: from God's creative activity to the hope of salvation in Jesus - a pulse of love which draws human relating into the work of the Spirit.

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