**Talk: WE ARE FAMILY *MM***

**Are you finding this Covid crisis tough? Of course you are! And it’s not getting any easier. One of the greatest sadnesses and difficulties of this crisis and the lockdown and all the disruption is the sense of isolation that so many are suffering. For many people, even if they have escaped sickness or bereavement themselves, the price paid - of being separated from loved ones - is a heavy one. One survey revealed that, *More than half of adults said their mental health had worsened during lockdown*! We shouldn’t be surprised at that because we were made for community. Right at the beginning, God said of Adam, *It is not good for the man to be alone (Gen. 2:18)* and, since, in Christ, there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28), we can be sure that that’s also true for women, too!**

**Some haven’t been able to worship with others since March, not even by *Zoom*! And even though Aled Jones and the others do a great job on *Songs of Praise*, it’s not the same as singing and praying together, is it? How can it be? You’re missing your friends, aren’t you? Keep praying for them that, someday, you’ll be able to meet up again. But there are some people, of course, who have no friends. They may be isolated because of circumstances or geography or even persecution. Have you ever puzzled over that line in one of our favourite hymns*, Do thy friends despise, forsake thee*? But that was Joseph Scriven’s experience when he wrote it. He’d started to meet with the Plymouth Brethren, a Christian sect, and it didn’t please all his friends. Some of them rejected him. Not everyone was pleased when Dawn and I were converted and started to meet with a brethren assembly. But what hymn did that line come from? *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*: listen, if you think you have no friends or if you are missing the ones you’ve got so much, remember the wisdom of Solomon, who wrote, in the Book of Proverbs, *There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother (Prov. 18:24).* That friend’s Jesus! How do I know? Well, didn’t He say, *You are my friends if you do what I command you* in John 15:14? Oh, so His friendship’s conditional, is it? I thought Dave said on Sunday that God loves us with no strings attached! So, what have I got to do to earn His friendship? He explained that, two verse earlier: *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you (v. 12).* He is the Friend who loves usand all He asks us to do is to extend His friendship to others.And He’ll help us to do it because He works with us because – remember? - He *sticks closer than a brother….***

**Ah, *brother*: I’ve got a brother, but he lives in Cheshire, so we haven’t seen each other since lockdown and that reminds me that there are some people with no brothers or sisters or any family at all. We can choose and lose our friends but we are *born* into families and some families die out. “Go forth and multiply,”God said to Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:28), but some families have proved better at subtraction and division than multiplication, leaving lone survivors, or, again, people cut off by geography or circumstance. Are you missing your family? Dawn and I so much want to be proper grandparents to our grandson, Isaac, ten months old now, but it’s so difficult at present and he’s only in Colchester! I know it’s far more difficult for many of you. But Psalm 68 verse 6 says, *God sets the lonely in families.* It’s talking about adoption, of course. Think of Jonathan’s son, Mephibosheth, who was the last survivor of his family. Didn’t King David adopt him? What does it say in 2 Samuel 9? *Mephibosheth ate at David’s table like one of the king’s sons (v. 11).* And hasn’t God Himself adopted us into His family and invited us to eat at His table (Rev. 3:20)? Paul wrote to the Ephesians, *In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ (1:4b-5a).* You may have no genetic family but you are part of the biggest family on earth – the family of God! And His family is everywhere! John heard them singing and he said that they came *from every nation, tribe, people and language (Rev. 7:9).* That means that some of God’s children live near you. They’ll be down your street, where you work, study or play. Make yourself known as a brother or sister and you’ll soon find other brothers and sisters! And even if you’re locked in on your own, every time you break your bread, you eat *like one of the king’s sons.***

**Some of us miss our mums. That may be because they’ve died – my Mum died 23 years ago but I still miss her, of course. Or perhaps they are far away and we can’t hug them and kiss them or get that wonderful advice from them that only a mother can give. Or perhaps there may be some who never had a mum. Not literally, of course, but you may have been parted very early or, perhaps, your mother made that greatest sacrifice a mother can make and laid down her life for you in childbirth. Did you know that God wants to *mother* you? A question from the prophet Isaiah: *Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne (Is. 49:15a)? “*Of course not!” we reply, horrified at the suggestion, and yet….and yet, doesn’t it happen every day? Not all mums are able to be the mothers we would wish for. So God answers the prophet’s question: *Though she may forget, I will not forget you (v. 15b)!* If you are weeping for a mother’s love, God knows and He hasn’t forgotten. He did something about it and sent Jesus. Yes, Jesus, that most manly of men – He, too, has His feminine side! As He looked upon the city of Jerusalem, with all its teeming multitudes, He said, *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem….how often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings (Mt. 23:37a).* If you are afraid, if you yearn for love, Jesus wants to gather you to Himself. But, He concluded sadly, *you were not willing (v. 37b).* The chick *can* run away from its mother and get lost or gobbled up by a hungry fox. Don’t be a runaway chick, will you? Swallow your pride and come in faith into Jesus’ motherly embrace.**

**But, supremely, God is, of course, our *Father.* Jesus famously said, “When you pray, say, *Our Father (Mt. 6:9),*” but, when *He* prayed, He said, *Abba, Father (Mk. 14:36)! Abba* was the word used in the family circle, intimate and loving. Jesus was praying before the crucifixion. In fact, He was praying in Gethsemane and asking His Father that He might not need to be crucified. But He accepted God’s will and died for us. And, later, Paul dared to write this to the Romans: *you have received the spirit of adoption by which you cry out, “Abba, Father (Ro. 8:15)!”* You see, on that cross, Jesus cried out, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Mt. 27:46)?* as He was cut off from His loving Abba Father so that we will never be (Heb. 13:5), so that we, too, can have that same *Abba Father* relationship *–* all that any earthly father can be and so much more!**

**These are tough times: we are all missing loved ones and yearn for Christian fellowship and worship. But He is with us and, whether we are looking for a Friend, a Brother, a Father or even a Mother, remember what John reflected on in his old age and wrote in his First Epistle: *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God (1 Jn. 3:1)!***