

THE RHYTHM OF LIFE

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Mark 10:6-9; 13-16; 1 Peter 2:4, 5; Matthew 13:31-33

Wangaratta, 15/2/15

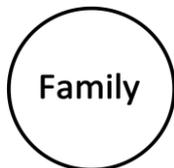
There's something quite therapeutic about a dedication – especially for me when it involves a beautiful granddaughter – at the end of a week when we said “goodbye” to a much-loved senior member of our congregation.

On Wednesday we gathered to celebrate the life of a man who lived his life as a Christian – not perfectly, I'm sure – but Rex was a good man, a good role model for many of us; a man who served his God faithfully through a long and fruitful life.

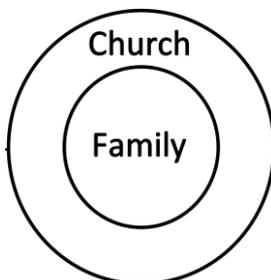
Ivy has just turned one; and she's off to a great start. This morning I want to try and identify some of the links between what we've done today, for Ivy, early in her life; and our time of celebration for Rex, on Wednesday. What are the factors that allow, encourage, guide someone into the full and productive life Rex exemplified and we celebrated with his family? What are the things we should be doing now, so that our young people, and our no longer so young people, can reach the end of their time on earth with something worth celebrating?

I've focussed my thoughts for this morning around three key structural units: the family, the church and the kingdom of God; and this week I've been trying to find a way to diagram the connections between them. And I'm not really satisfied with what I've come up with. Here's some homework; or a challenge for you (for those who prefer a challenge to homework!) See if you can come up with a better visual way to portray the connection between the family, the church and the kingdom of God. Here are my two attempts:

The first is basically a set of concentric circles. First up, the family:



God's basic unit for the introduction of new life into our world. Next,

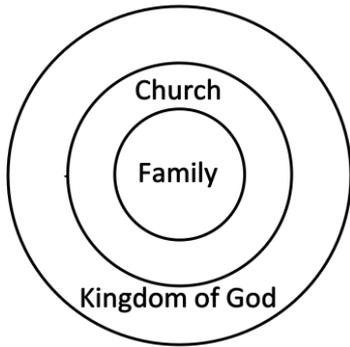


the local church as the extended family; and wider again, and a little harder to define,

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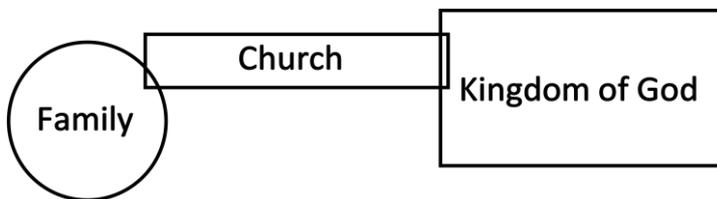
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Wangaratta, 15/2/15



the kingdom of God. What do you reckon? I think it has some merit, but it lacks something, too.

Here's my second attempt.



This one tries to highlight the church as a bridge between the family and the kingdom of God. I'm still thinking about that! See what you can come up with. Show me after the service, or email it to me through the week. Let's start with the

**I. Family.**

And let me read to you the words I use at the start of a wedding service:

The Bible teaches that marriage was instituted by God in the Garden of Eden, and that it is to be a permanent relationship of one man and one woman, freely and totally committed to each other in joyful expectation as husband and wife for a lifetime. Jesus himself declared that a man shall leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two become one. He personally joined in the celebration of a wedding in Cana. From the beginning God has given marriage as a way in which we may discover and grow in his love.

Into this new unit, out of the physical expression of a couple's love for each other, a new life is conceived and brought into our world. Who but our God could come up with such a beautiful concept? The family was God's idea.

I want to identify the family in our outlines this morning as a

**A. Source of Life and Hope.**

## THE RHYTHM OF LIFE

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Wangaratta, 15/2/15

Haven't we all looked at a tiny, newborn baby; and marvelled at the perfection of features, and contemplated the potential, and speculated about the future ahead for him or her? God does not deliver new little humans into a hostile environment and leave them to fend for themselves. He carefully introduces these little people into a warm, caring place – family – where loving parents, and doting grandparents, and sometimes energetic siblings, are ready to welcome them and care for their every need.

The family was no accident. At the beginning of our passage from Mark; Jesus notes that our genders and the formation of our families were ordained by God, right back at creation. And at this point we find something of a paradox. Our families are

### **B. Perfectly Designed; Ordinary Performers!**

Let me invite you to reflect on the families you grew up in; before we consider those we live in now! I'm grateful for the family God gave me when I was growing up; it was far from perfect! I'm very grateful for the family God has given me with Loris... there have been one or two occasions over the years ... who am I kidding? Our performances on lots of occasions, have been fairly ordinary.

We tend to use the term "dysfunctional" as a category; it's actually a matter of degree. In spite of God's brilliant design, as individuals and families, we all fall short.

Consider the families of some of the "heroes" from Old Testament times. Joseph's family was pretty dysfunctional. His father, Jacob had two wives, (he loved one more than the other), and children from two maidservants as well. Joseph's brothers initially planned to kill him. Instead, they dropped him down a well, sold him to slave traders, and told Jacob wild animals must have got him! Your family's not so bad! Cain killed his brother, Abel. King David's children were a disaster!

Is there a design fault with the family? Not at all! There is a sin problem that taints all people! God sent his Son to free us from our sins. He loves us, and accepts us in our brokenness, as individuals and families; he seeks to restore us to wholeness in him.

As God's children today, parents have the privilege of

### **C. Bringing Our Children to Jesus**

Mark says the parents "were *bringing*" their little children to Jesus. They didn't *send* them. There is a substantial difference. The parents came with their children.

This principle lies behind our dedication services. We can't "turn our children into Christians". We don't have to. We can introduce our children to Jesus, and we do this in a

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Wangaratta, 15/2/15

variety of ways, including dedication. In a moment I want to turn to the role the church has in supplementing and assisting parents in this. It works best when it happens in that order. Parents “bring their children to Jesus” when their children see Jesus in the way Mum and Dad live their lives, and treat their children. They get to know about Jesus through the stories we read them. They come to know him as someone “real” when they discover their parents see him, and speak of him and to him as a real person.

Bringing our children is not a once only event; it’s a process that continues and changes, as our children grow through the stages of their development.

What sort of response will our children find when we do this? We noted last week that “Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday and today and forever.” Our reading tells us back then, Jesus took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them, and blessed them.<sup>1</sup> We know he will respond to our children the same way today.

What sort of response will our children find, when we bring them to

## II. Church?

We believe the church, and *our* church, should be a

### A. Source of Encouragement and Support;

to children and their parents. We’re disappointed to read that the disciples rebuked the parents who brought their children to Jesus that day. Why would they do that? Perhaps they saw how busy Jesus was, and tried to shield him. Did they just see children as unimportant, and a waste of Jesus’ time?

As a church, we should be guided by Jesus’ response. How could his followers do such a thing? “Let the little children come to me,” he told them; and his next words are significant: “for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”

Parents who bring their children to church should find from us, firstly, a *welcome* for them and their children; then *encouragement* for making their children’s spiritual life a priority, and *support* for their role as parents. We often talk about the importance of Children’s Church as part of what we do here. Let me also highlight this morning the importance of informal encouragement and support, especially from those who are older, for parents and their children.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:16

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Rex was particularly good at this. And I heard stories on Wednesday of Rex encouraging our children as he spoke to them. Rex is gone. Who will step up and take his place?

Along with encouragement and support, churches are to be places of

### **B. Guidance and Nurture.**

We often hear the expression, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Mostly, we don’t live in villages any more; and that sense of community and corporate responsibility seems to be diminishing.

The church can play an important role here. We can be the “village” for those who lack an accessible community around them; we can be family, to those who find themselves without a family they can rely on. This is a comparatively easy thing to say; and substantially more difficult to live up to!

I love the interaction I see between our teens and our younger children; you probably don’t know how much it means to our children to have those of you who are a little older take an interest in them. Or how much it means to parents, who may be struggling with aspects of their parenting, to see lovely teenagers who have obviously grown through the challenges of childhood – and are learning to cope with the challenges of the teenage years.

That process of guidance and nurture, and role modelling continues up the age range. I value the example and witness of those a little older than I am. Of course we seek to provide guidance and nurture through our structure and programs; but all this happens best in community. Let me encourage you all to consider the role you play in this, simply by your presence, and your interaction with others. Church is, or it should be

### **C. A Safe Place.**

Reports in recent times, and last year’s Royal Commission have shown us that for some, church has been anything but a safe place. That’s tragic! And we’ve found ourselves discussing issues and introducing measures I simply would never have considered, not so long ago.

Church, as an institution, has had its name dragged through the mud, and not only by those who love to discredit the church; and we’ve all been tainted by association.

Please help us make and keep our church a safe place. Safety encompasses many factors, including perhaps the most obvious, our physical environment. Please be careful in our sometimes crowded facilities. Gently suggest our rather energetic children be careful, when you see them engaging in acts that could be dangerous to themselves, or others. Speak to one of us if you notice something that concerns you.

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Wangaratta, 15/2/15

Can we please be careful in our conversations, in the words we choose in discussing issues we may be passionate about, in the way we work our way through areas of difference? I may be quite fragile in an area that is not important to you. My clumsy attempt at humour can be damaging; unless I'm sensitive to where you're coming from. Just as your words of encouragement can make my day, most of us can be wounded by something said carelessly.

Life itself can be quite dangerous. We all need a safe place. I think we *are* a safe place. Let's do all we can to keep it that way. And I want to move on to talk about

### III. The Kingdom of God.

Our little children don't remain children forever. We don't want them to; do we? Even if we would sometimes love to hold them there a little longer! Our teenagers don't stay teenagers forever; and some of us loved our children's teenage years! And our lovely young adults spread their wings, leave home, and many leave their church home which has loved them and nurtured them through their formative years.

It's the way it should be, especially in the country as our students head off to other places for their tertiary education, and others to work opportunities, and into other churches to bless them as they've blessed us. Which leads us to the Kingdom of God;

#### A. God's Plan for the People He Loves.

The local church is a vital part of God's plan. His kingdom is bigger than the local church. It takes a bit for us to understand the differences, and the links between these two important components of God's plan for his people.

The term "kingdom" deals principally with who's in charge. Kingdoms come under the authority of a king. Jesus told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world."<sup>2</sup> His rule and authority is not confined or limited to a place. Our young adults take God's kingdom with them, in their hearts, as they leave us. Many of you serve God in his kingdom when you honour him, and use your gifts for his glory, beyond the parameters of our church. We as a church can and should be actively involved in kingdom work and kingdom building. The things we do in mission are an obvious example of this. Chaplaincy, religious education in our schools, emergency relief work; all these and more are opportunities to serve God's kingdom, and extend God's kingdom. Whenever we acknowledge or live out God's rule in our hearts, we declare our allegiance to his kingdom.

I love Jesus' little parables about God's kingdom. The message of the two in our readings this morning is pretty clear: God's kingdom is

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<sup>2</sup> John 18:36

## B. Living, Growing.

That little mustard seed doesn't remain a seed forever. Watch it grow and achieve the potential God placed within it when he decreed that living things will reproduce themselves, after their kind. That's what the Kingdom of God is all about: reproduction! Little mustard seeds grow into mustard plants. Little children, introduced early to Jesus, loved and nurtured by parents and the church, grow through their teenage years and their faith matures along with the bodies. They share their faith with others, new Christians are "born" and God's kingdom grows.

It's hard to see yeast in a lump of dough. I probably couldn't tell the difference between dough with yeast in it, and dough without... before it comes out of the oven! God's kingdom is like that. Not everything Christians do is easily noticed; and we may think our presence at times, especially in our work environment, doesn't make a lot of difference. We can only see what we can see. *Beyond* what we can see, the kingdom of God is living and growing, and

## C. Transforming the World.

The branches of a mustard tree, give shade and shelter to the birds. Yeast changes the whole nature and outcome for the lump of dough. God's kingdom is like that! It's *God's* kingdom; and it can never fail to achieve *God's purposes*. It's our privilege to be given a role to play, in our families, our church, and in God's kingdom.

In many ways, this has been a week of celebration. It was sad to say "Goodbye" to Rex on Wednesday; but a privilege to celebrate with his family a good life, lived well. Yesterday, some of us celebrated Ivy's first birthday, and today we stand with Paul & Roxy as they formally dedicate her to God. In just a moment we will say "Goodbye" to last year's Year 12 students, as they head off in different directions. We celebrate their achievements; and we look forward to following their progress, as we have with others before them.

So we press on, working together; in our families, in our church, as part of God's growing kingdom. May he continue to bless us, as we continue to serve him. And may his kingdom come, and his will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.