

PSALM 133

A Song of Ascents.

¹ How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
² It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
³ It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there God ordained God's blessing,
life for evermore.

This psalm is all about our relations as humans, our relations as “kindred.” Biologically speaking, our kindred are our blood relations, but metaphorically speaking, our kindred are all those we choose to claim as family. Who is your family and your kindred? For the Hebrews, kindred in a literal sense meant their blood relatives which in the widest sense meant every Hebrew. It was about race. But it was also about land and soil and animals because they were part of them too.

Aaron is the brother of Moses and the first priest of the people of Israel. He represents all that is sacred for the Hebrews and the faith of a people that makes them Hebrew. Zion is a spiritual word for the land of Israel centred in its capital – Jerusalem. Both the people and the land, Aaron and Zion have been anointed by oil (used for ordination) and dew (imaged as nature's anointing oil falling upon the mountains of Zion) by a God who has embraced them as God's own. This psalm is about identity, but it is also a call to unity. The people must come together and find those things that unite them above those things that divide them: “How very pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!” We are all family. We all share not only blood, but a common faith and a land given us as a gift.

But perhaps the problem of division comes into play when blood relations becomes an us over them and even an us against them above any larger unity in a common faith and a land that must be shared. So then, is the problem the more narrow understanding of family and kindred itself? Jesus, and following Jesus the apostle Paul, expand the understanding of kindred to become much more about faith, hope and love. Belonging to the body of Christ and opening one's heart and soul to become his hands, feet and heart in the world makes a person kindred and family much deeper than blood relations and race could ever do. Love binds people together in ways blood often fails to do.

But of course, this psalm is not about choosing one over the other. Read metaphorically, it's an invitation to expand our understanding of kindred and family. What families are you a part of?

And how much is your family defined by relations of love over other things? The truth is even as our biological families can be sources of deep fulfillment and identity for many of us, for others of us our families are sources of deep pain and conflict in us, making us vulnerable and leading to a lifetime of needed healing from the trauma of hurt and abuse.

It is this both-and understanding of kindred and family that is the background to this psalm. For pilgrims ascending to worship and celebrate together over the high holidays, the prayer is for unity. It is a beautiful thing when we can come together and feel as one, and it is especially beautiful when that which unites us is greater than anything that may divide us. When love is coursing through our relations it is easy to feel as one, but when we feel divided, and especially over values and principles that involve justice, it is difficult to feel united.

This psalm challenges us in two ways. The first and more obvious way is to reflect on those differences and issues we have with people in our lives. Do such differences and issues deserve all we're putting into them? Why are we triggered so? Is there a better way to engage the differences and work toward some kind of reconciliation or at the very least a peace in letting go and moving on? Second, though, the psalm is also a challenge for us to think of situations in our relations when we need to take a stand for what's right, true and just, even when that means conflict and breakdown in the relationship. Our allegiance to God and to right must never be compromised because we have to support our relations because they are blood. Losing our soul to keep family is never a worthy price to pay. What do you think?

PRAYER: Thank you, O God, for family, however we define the family that is ours. We have multiple belongings. There are blood relations, there is race and culture, there are work relations and there is friendship. There is spiritual connection and community, too. For any such belongings we can truly call family, we thank you, O God. We cannot take any of that for granted. And for any family that is a source of support, fulfillment and joy we thank you, even as we also pray for all those who carry deep pain, hurt and unresolved grief and bitterness. May your healing balm surround and pass through and may doors to a healing path open up. We pray this way in the name of Jesus the healer and Jesus whose family we claim as our own... Amen.