

Sermon - the stronger man

Based on the readings: Genesis 3.8–15; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 4.13–5.1; Mark 3.19b–35

- In terms of the annual calendar of seasons in the church's year, we have come to the end of the Lent and Easter seasons, with the celebration of both Pentecost and Trinity Sunday over the last two Sundays.
- We have now resumed what is called Ordinary time, marked by the liturgical colour of green: green being a symbol of growth rather than of special observances and celebrations.
- This also means that we resume reading through one of the synoptic Gospel accounts - Mark being the one set for this year.
- And so we re-engage with Mark's account, immediately after the description of Jesus appointing twelve named disciples.
- This was a visible metaphor for establishing anew the twelve tribes of Israel - that is, the leaders of the new kingdom of God.

- After this Jesus finds himself being opposed in his ministry, by those who have been closest to him - his family - and by those whose spiritual authority is being challenged by him - the religious leaders called scribes.
- Mark combines these two sources of opposition in parallel to each other.
- Elsewhere in the New Testament scriptures we are presented with descriptions and commentary that is supportive of family relationships, and so we might find Mark's description here a little discomfoting.
- I find my own experience of growing up in Apartheid South Africa provides some helpful insight into the possible concerns that the members of Jesus' family had about him.
- During the Apartheid years, members of the white population could have been broadly categorised as either actively supporting Apartheid, or passively supporting or opposing Apartheid, or actively opposing it.
- For those who were actively opposing it there was the danger of being imprisoned, banned, or even killed.
- And so for their families, there was often a great deal of anxiety about the consequences to their loved ones for challenging the status quo, and having their lives destroyed, in one way or another.
- Of course, those fighting apartheid were doing so to help create a new and more just South Africa, that would benefit everyone.

- In a very similar way, the family of Jesus would have been greatly concerned for the safety of one they loved, who was setting himself so actively against the status quo, and challenging those in authority.
- And it turned out that they were quite right to be concerned, because in the end those religious leaders worked with the Roman regime to have Jesus captured, tortured, and killed.
- So Mark describes them here expressing their concern: *'He has gone out of his mind'* (Mark 3.21), or in a more literal translation, 'He is beside himself.'
- But just as those in South Africa who actively opposed Apartheid were trying to create a new and better state, so Jesus was on his way to establish a new people of God -
- a people not bound by nationality, or citizenship, or language, or ethnicity, but one established through a spiritual kinship -
- the kinship of being sisters and brothers of Jesus, through shared faith in Jesus Christ himself.
- Jesus spells this out in exactly those terms: *'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'* (Mark 3.35)

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- The fact that he doesn't also reference 'father' in his list of family members is because he teaches us that we share with him the same heavenly Father, underscored by his prayer: *'Our father in heaven ...'*
- This notion of being members of the family of God, sisters and brothers with each other in Christ, is fundamental to being part of God's kingdom.
- One of the aspects that Mark highlights in this teaching of Jesus is this resetting of our loyalties.
- This is *not* to say that our blood relations should be any less important to us as for those who are not members of God's family.
- Rather, it's letting us know that our fellow sisters and brothers in Christ are *just as important* as those who are our blood sisters and brothers.
- The saying: 'blood is thicker than water' means that *'family relationships and loyalties are the strongest and most important ones.'* (*New Oxford Dictionary*)
- This is one of the reasons why Jesus gave us the sacrament of communion, in which we actively and intentionally share in the blood of Jesus.
- It is like a spiritual transfusion, in which we become invigorated with the spiritual blood of Jesus, and which we all share in together.
- I suggest that Jesus would agree with the meaning of the saying 'blood is thicker than water', and point out that since we all share in his blood spiritually, that the same relationships and loyalties we have with our physical family also apply to our spiritual family.
- Many of us who have siblings, who we might find challenging in different ways, understand that no matter how difficult and hard work they might be, they remain family.
- That is, we stay connected with them - even if only at a distance - and feel compelled to help them when they ask, or think that *they* should feel compelled to help *us* if *we* ask.
- I think that Jesus is wanting us to have that same kind of loyalty to our spiritual siblings, to those who are striving to follow the Way of Jesus, and striving to discern and enact the will of our heavenly Father, even when we find them challenging.

- The other part of today's Gospel passage needs some careful consideration.
- Just before Mark's description of Jesus appointing the twelve named disciples, Jesus had not only been curing people of diseases, but had also been delivering people of so-called unclean spirits - that is, all that was spiritually preventing them from engaging with God.
- As I pointed out earlier, this was effectively challenging the spiritual authority of the scribes: this was supposed to be their area of authority, and he was both clearly not one of them and clearly more effective in the deliverance that he enacted.
- Also, Jesus prioritised these life-giving actions over such rules as not working on the Sabbath.
- So the scribes accuse him of acting under the power of Beelzebul - Lord of the Flies and Prince of Demons.
- Jesus initially counters with some simple logic: If this is being done through the power of Satan, then Satan's kingdom is at an end, because he's working against himself.
- And he continues by pointing out:
'no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.' (*Mark 3.27*)
- That is, if Satan is not working against himself, then someone more powerful than Satan is here, and thus Satan's kingdom is still at an end.
- The implication is that either way, Satan's kingdom is at an end - and isn't that something to celebrate, and participate in?

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- Then Jesus attacks them directly over their attitude:
'Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin' (Mark 3.28-29)
- Jesus points out that if they decide that the love, light and life they see being manifest in Jesus' words and actions is not of God, but of Satan, then they are so flawed in their comprehension of God that they cannot *have forgiveness*, and that this *sin is eternal*.
- This has really sidetracked some theologians over the centuries, because it seems to provide an exception to the notion that God offers everyone complete and absolute forgiveness when we turn back to him, no matter how wicked we've been.
- However, the idea that someone will always have this particular sin held against them forever misunderstands two simple concepts here:
 1. The first is that while God does indeed always offer forgiveness for all sins - for everything that comes between us and God - it doesn't mean that *we* always *accept* that forgiveness.
 - If we do something wrong, but don't or won't recognise that we've done something wrong, then we naturally refuse to be forgiven for it.
 - After all, if someone offered me forgiveness for breaking a window that someone else broke, I would want to reject that - because if I accepted that forgiveness, then it would mean that I acknowledged the guilt of it.
 2. The second concept is that the word *eternal* in Scripture does not mean never-ending, but rather *in all its fullness*.
 - So *eternal life* means 'life in all its fullness', and *eternal sin* means 'separation from God in all its fullness'.
 - Not 'never-ending separation from God', but 'complete separation from God'.
- So Jesus' words should make sense: if someone is so wilful as to label love as hate, or light as darkness, or life-bearing as death-dealing, then they have put themselves outside of being able to comprehend and accept God's forgiveness - even though it's perpetually offered to them.
- If they are serious in naming God's Spirit as the spirit of Satan, then this is the fundamental blasphemy.
- However, if they later recognise this and acknowledge that their separation from God, then they put themselves back in the position to be able to receive forgiveness - because they will then be able to see love as loving, light as truth-revealing, and life as life enabling.
- Then they would be able to recognise the new kingdom of God that Jesus was establishing, and be able to join in, and celebrate, and give thanks.
- And so this is what we are doing here now: celebrating our kinship with and in Christ, and giving thanks that while Satan might appear strong at times, that the stronger one has arrived, and has bound Satan, so that we ourselves can be free to participate in God's kingdom, here and now.