

Jesus declares war on the old order (Mark 3: 20-35)

Jesus and Beelzebul

Then he went home; ²⁰and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.' ²²And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.' ²³And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, 'How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. ²⁷But 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.

²⁸ 'Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin'— ³⁰for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'

The True Kindred of Jesus

³¹ Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³²A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' ³³And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' ³⁴And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

Commentary

Jesus' first direct confrontation with the world order underpinned by the priests, scribes and Pharisees reaches a climax in this week's passage. Think of it as the opening skirmish or battle in a war. It is a disturbing passage, especially for those of us immersed (or even skilled) in the realpolitik of church life: Jesus is adamant that there is no room for compromise or deals with the old order. This is a "war of the

worlds” in which coexistence is impossible.

“He’s nuts! He’s possessed!” (vv21-2)

Jesus retreats to the house as a place of relief and safety (v20), but isn’t even able to sit down to a meal because of the disruption caused by the crowds of needy people. At precisely this moment, the resistance Jesus has already generated crystallises shockingly, publicly and vehemently from two sources: his family (v21) and religious investigators sent from Jerusalem (v22).

The two charges are levelled against him consecutively:

1. And his family ... said: “He is out of his mind!” (deluded)
2. And the scribes ... said: “He is possessed by Beelzebul!”
(demonic)

Jesus has challenged the old order and set about building the new world of the Kingdom. The opening phase of his ministry in Capernaum ends with this double counterattack: to his extended family, he is deluded; to his political opponents, he is demonic.

Jesus vs “The Strong Man” (vv23-27)

This is an absolutely key moment in Mark’s presentation of Jesus (his Christology). Jesus’ response to the accusation levelled by “the scribes of Jerusalem” is sandwiched between his encounter with his extended family.

The accusation of demon possession by the scribes signals what we learned in v6: the authorities have already realised that Jesus cannot be argued into silence, or tripped up and defeated theologically and biblically. Moreover, he cannot be ignored because of the power of his preaching, healing and exorcisms. Their move is typical: they send for

“experts” or “authority figures” to discredit Jesus publicly.

The charge that he is possessed by Beelzebul is the equivalent of the Apartheid government declaring that Tutu was a Communist, or of Donald Trump accusing Jesus of being a member of Islamic State. It’s the classic move in response to “speaking truth to power”: set the prophet up as the enemy of the common good by character assassination and demonization (in this case, literally!).

If we hear the talk of Satan as “merely mythological” – as some sort of “primitive world view” – we miss its theological and political significance. “The kingdom of Satan” is used to designate the negative experiences of earthly rule – a counter, in other words, to the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is creation as God intended it; its opposite is the world we human beings have created in disobedience and rebellion.

According to the Apocalypse of the Shepherds in Ethiopian Enoch 85-90, when Israel lost its political independence, God relegated rule over it to the fallen angels, the subjects of Satan. Invoking Satan in this context is therefore to deny that Jesus’ role is messianic – that he is God’s Liberator, sent to accomplish a New Exodus on behalf of a world in chains.

Jesus’ parable

The demons were “occupying forces”. That they were intimately connected to the occupying Roman legions would have been obvious to Jesus’ contemporaries – including the scribes. But here, Jesus turns on his opponents. He doesn’t try to reassure them that he is their friend, standing with them against the common Roman enemy. Instead, he tells them that *they* are the enemy; that the temple system has been

infiltrated and is controlled by an “occupying force” that needs to be exorcised (“cast out”).

This is clear from two factors: firstly, Jesus will exorcise the temple by “casting out” the moneychangers – the economic system that has turned grace and forgiveness into commodities to be bought and sold. And secondly, the scribes do not recognise God’s liberation in action. Instead, they turn it into something “odious”. This is what Jesus describes as the sin against the Holy Spirit: the refusal “to recognise, with ‘theological’ joy, some concrete liberation that is taking place before one’s very eyes” (Juan Luis Segundo).

This is Jesus’ declaration of war. Far from being possessed by Satan, he is declaring war on the “Strong Man”, and sees his ministry as plundering all Satan’s strongholds, liberating the captives.

Jesus’ family: repudiating the kinship system (vv31-34)

Family was everything in Jesus’ world. It determined marriage, vocation, social position, and identity. It was a good thing – a gift from God. Yet Mark ends this opening section of his gospel with a standoff between Jesus and his family: they are “outside” and will not come into the house. Jesus is “inside” and will not go outside to see them.

The issue is Jesus’ vocation and identity as the “beloved Son” of the Father, which is expressed in his messianic ministry and mission. The family can’t accept that this entails turning *everything* upside down, including family loyalties. That is sheer madness! But if they will not accept his vocation, neither will he accept them as family. Identity is no longer to be determined by blood ties – whether to family or religion. Jesus introduces a new model of kinship based on obedience to God alone. On that criterion, even the best and holiest of the “old

ways” can prove to be the enemy of the Kingdom, refusing the need for root and branch transformation (being “born again”, as John puts it). That resistance will not recognise God’s salvation – even when it appears in front of its own nose!

Going deeper into the text (Mark 3: 20-35)

Families are funny things: every one is different, and sometimes they're all the same. Mark's text highlights the time when Jesus' enemies and Jesus' family were united in their opposition to what Jesus was doing. How difficult it must have been for Jesus to hear the rumour that he was "possessed"! But he took the Pharisees on and showed how they were so obviously wrong. It must have been much harder to hear his family to describe him as "out of his mind". Imagine that was your family describing you. He could take his enemies on, but Jesus could only ignore his family when they came to collect their errant son.

Was it this pain that drove Jesus to remind his crowd of disciples that they were each other's mother, brother and sister? Was it the pain of being misunderstood by even his family - of feeling really let down by his mother and siblings - that led him to encourage his disciples to create a new network of support? Jesus did not encourage his disciples to rush home and reassure their families that they were okay. Jesus decided that, in the face of combined opposition and misunderstanding, they had to commit to even stronger ties with one another.

For reflection:

1. When "the going gets tough", do we find "family" support in our churches?
2. How can we ensure that people who are finding life hard feel supported and part of our church family? Jesus seems so committed to this new unit of support that, even on the cross, he bestowed on the Beloved Disciple a new mum, and on his Mum a new son.

A reflection exercise for café-like church

1. Play *Our House* by Madness
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3HYzkZib8g>)
2. Read Philip Larkin's *This Be The Verse* (adapted)

This Be The Verse

They muck you up, your mum and dad.

They may not mean to, but they do.

They fill you with the faults they had

And add some extra, just for you.

But they were mucked up in their turn

By fools in old-style hats and coats,

Who half the time were sappy-stern

And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.

It deepens like a coastal shelf.

Get out as early as you can,

And don't have any kids yourself.

For groups: How can we become a supportive family, even when members are acting "out of their minds"?

All age worship ideas (Mark 3: 20-35)

Illustration:

In CS Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lucy Pevensie stumbles upon the magical land of Narnia where she has tea with a faun called Tumnus. On returning her brothers and sister don't believe her and tell her she is making it all up. When the youngest brother Edmund also discovers the land through the wardrobe and meets the white witch he continues to deny everything and plays along with the idea that Lucy is lying. Eventually, of course, they discover that Lucy was telling the truth all along and so begins their adventure.

(This could be a film clip or you could invite some young people to act out the story)

It takes a lot to stand up for what you believe in even when no one thinks you are telling the truth especially those you love. As difficult as it was and as sad as it made her that her own family wouldn't believe her Lucy never backed down.

Jesus faced the same kind of problem – no one would believe him even though they could see the amazing results of his ministry

Reflections:

We're only at chapter 3 and all ready we see that Jesus is beginning to wind people up. He seems to be causing offence all round – and yet all he is doing is God's work!

And that it seems is exactly what offends. He has disciples; he seems to have a power that releases people from long-term illness and possession, and wherever he goes there is a crowd.

- His family decides to sort things out perhaps believing him to have lost his mind or troubled by the rumours that are suggesting he has and go to take him away from the situation.
- The religious leaders perhaps under fire for not doing what Jesus is doing go on the offensive and spread the word that he must be evil or how else would he be driving out demons.
- Jesus of course responds with incredulity. How can evil stop evil? They are speaking of a power that implodes on itself, which makes no sense.
- Then when he is told of his family's presence he denounces them and sets the tone for a new understanding of family.
- There is a degree of frustration and irritation in Jesus responses – a lot of influential people it would seem want him to stop doing what he is doing – consequently he is called mad, false and evil.

But Jesus follows one agenda – not that of his family or the religious authorities but Gods. Jesus is uncompromising in this and his disappointment must come from the fact that though he is doing good work, God's work, it is neither recognized nor valued. No wonder he goes on the front foot and attacks them for undermining the kingdom, for sowing doubt in the minds of those the reign of God is wanting to set free. The Spirit is bringing about a new creation, grace is being revealed in an unprecedented way, and those who oppose him are actively trying to deny it, unpick it and stop it from going any further. Jesus is clear – this is not just an attack on him but the Spirit who is

central to the life of the people of God – they must understand the seriousness of what they do.

There is an opportunity for them to understand family a new way. Not as blood tie but as those who actively pursue the things of God – who obey and do what God has always called his people to do.

Challenge: Following Jesus may prove to be an exciting adventure for us but it also can mean rejection or disbelief from those we love and respect. Equally when we are faithful to what God is calling us to do it can bring us into opposition with people in power, people who govern as well as those who lead our churches. How much are we prepared to stand our ground in order to stay true to what God might be calling us into?

Music/Readings:

‘The family’ – Present on Earth p.51 Wild Goose Resources

‘Lord it can be hard following you’ Facing the Storm p.43 Eddie Askew (The Leprosy Mission Intl)

Here with me – Tim Hughes SoF (Bk6) 3128

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MkCXrM7R5c&list=RD0MkCXrM7R5c>

Keep the faith – Tim Hughes SoF (Bk5) 2354

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BpyzIHg97s>

Through days of rage and wonder – Graham Kendrick SoF (Bk3)1567

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpPhG2QvqQo>

SoF = Songs of Fellowship (- corresponding music edition)

Liturgies and hymns (Mark 3: 20-35)

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.

HYMNS

God is love, his the care (R&S 274)

Who would true valour see (R&S 557)

When unholy, selfish actions

Tune: R&S 95 (Blaenwern)

When unholy, selfish actions
make it hard to simply live,
when we nurture destitution
open eyes, good God forgive.
Only when our measures offer
sacrificial signs of grace
can we claim the name of Christian,
seeing Christ in every face.

Justice calls for equal sharing
of commodities and wealth,
food and water, clothing, shelter
and necessities for health;
but unequal distribution
and the curse of human greed
predicate the legislation
framed to meet each human need.

Tax can be a tool for gracing
those in poverty and fear,
and the means of our disclosing
all pretension's false veneer.
Now we followers of Jesus
vow to turn the world around:
cheats and dodgers fall from favour,
risen poor share common ground.

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LITURGY

Call to worship

We are called to be people of faith in the midst of the world,
**and so we mix our worship and our work,
our faith and our life.**

We gather here as people who live in the world and yet,
**we gather as people who have been called to see the world
from a different viewpoint.**

God has called us together,

God has called us to be part of a community.

**God challenges us to consider questions of priority
as we engage with the world.**

In this time together,

may God open our hearts, minds and eyes,

allowing us to see deeper,

helping us to live in the world
while still offering a challenge to the ways of the world.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

~ posted by Rev Gord on his blog, **Worship**

Offerings. <http://worshipofferings.blogspot.ca/>

Prayers:

Prayers of Confession

God of grace, you invite us to a banquet, and we don't even respond.
You set us a place at the table, but we find excuses not to come.
You lovingly prepare for our arrival, yet we ignore your efforts.
Forgive us, God.

God of creation, you give us a world capable of abundance,
but we act as if it is a world of scarcity.
You give us the resources and the intelligence to provide for all,
yet we lack the will and the vision to feed all of your children.
Forgive us, God, for filling our plates while others go hungry.

God of love, you call us to be the body of Christ in the world,
but we hoard the blessings of communion for ourselves.
Instead of loving our neighbors, we are consumed by the love of self.
Instead of loving you, we bow before idols of our own making.
Forgive us, God.

God of hope, we avert our eyes when we see hunger and need;
we close our ears to the cries of the poor and the oppressed;
we refuse to let our minds be opened to the realities of our world;

we refuse to let our hearts overflow with love and compassion.
Forgive us, God.

God of mercy, as you once again call us to your table, help us to
respond in faith.

Forgive our failures and help us to learn from them.

Change our hearts and minds as we hear your good news proclaimed.

Help us to taste and see the goodness you have prepared for us,
and for the world. Amen.

~ written by John W. Vest, and posted on **John**

Vest. <http://johnvest.com/>

A Litany

Here's a responsive prayer litany inspired by Martin Luther King's "I
Have a Dream" speech. It was written by Christine Sine and posted
on *Godspace*.

May we dream of a world made new,

Where together we shout for justice,

And as one we fight against oppression.

May we dream of a world made new,

Where together we seek God's righteousness

And as one we sing God's praise.

May we dream of a world made new,

Where together we climb God's mountain,

And as one we enter the promised land.

May we dream of a world made new,

Where together we proclaim the good news of God's kingdom,

And as one we enjoy its peace, and abundance and love.

~ from Christine

Sine's *Godspace* website. <http://godspace.wordpress.com/2013/08/19/i-have-a-dream-a-prophetic-speech-now-50-years-old/>