

Pentecost 3 Year B 2024

Genesis 3:8-15, 2 Corinthians 4:13 - 5:1, Mark 3:20-35

Mark is the gospel for the current church year so throughout June and for most of July our gospel readings will come from Mark. And when we read Mark it is helpful to bear in mind that it is not a random set of anecdotes in roughly chronological order, but a carefully crafted piece of literature. Mark has truths he wants his readers to see.

One of the devices he uses for this is the “sandwich”, where he inserts one story inside another to emphasise something he wants the reader to notice. Our gospel reading this morning is one such sandwich.

In Matthew and Luke the altercation with the teachers of the law follows immediately on a healing where Jesus drives out a demon, which makes the accusation we read in Mark by the teachers of the law a natural, albeit mistaken, response.

Mark only alludes to the healing of the demon-afflicted man in favour of sandwiching the episode of the conflict between accounts of close associates or family of Jesus wishing to take control him, to press Jesus into their own mould. And by using this technique Mark highlights the antithesis between those who would take control of Jesus, and Jesus the Messiah who can control the evil spiritual forces in the world.

Verse 20 sets the context. Jesus has entered a house with his disciples and a crowd has gathered to see him. We don't know where the house is – probably somewhere in Galilee. The house seems to be packed with people come to see Jesus, as there is no opportunity, probably neither timewise nor space wise, for him and the disciples to eat.

Then we read *When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’*

The word translated “family” here in the NIV literally means “the ones around him”. Since Jesus's actual family arrives later, here it is probably close friends or associates.

They apparently consider that Jesus ensconcing himself in a crowded house with who-knows-what sort of people without eating indicates insanity on Jesus's part. So, their, probably good, intention is to take charge of him, presumably to rescue him from himself.

Actually, the Greek for to take charge of him is stronger than the English suggests. The word means "seize" and apparently Mark uses it, here as elsewhere, to mean that they wished to bind Jesus and deprive him of his freedom.

Then another group of people speak up, the teachers of the law who have travelled especially from Jerusalem on Jesus's account. They hold a similar view to the associates because they pronounce, with all their theological knowledge and wisdom, that Jesus is possessed by Beelzebul, whom they describe as the Prince of Demons.

The word Beelzebul is interesting. Here it obviously refers to Satan but the word itself appears to be a corrupted amalgam of the word Baal, the chief god in opposition to Yahweh in the Old Testament, and zeboul which in the Old Testament referred to an exalted prince or ruler, or to his dwelling place.

So Beelzebul can indicate the House, or Kingdom, of Baal.

The teachers of the law accuse Jesus of driving out demons by being possessed by the Prince of Demons. Note that they do not question that Jesus has the power to drive out demons or are saying that it is faked. Just that his power to do so is coming from someone else other than Holy Spirit.

This seems to be a red rag-to-a-bull moment for Jesus. He calls the teachers of the law over in order to set them straight. Jesus clearly thinks that it is a ridiculous notion to say he is driving out demons by means of their boss. As well as being untrue and blasphemous it is absurd. He points out how ludicrous it would be for Satan to oppose himself. It would bring the whole house down! Note here how Jesus picks up on the word Beelzebul, the House or Kingdom of Baal, with his remarks: *If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.*

This observation sets up Jesus's next words, a commentary on his driving out the demon: *In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house.* What Jesus is saying, which Mark's sandwich device emphasises, is 'You teachers of the law, think you can control me by your blasphemous pronouncement – your words - as to the source of my power, but I demonstrate by my actions that my power is greater than Satan's, so must be by Holy Spirit.'

Jesus is incensed by the blasphemy of saying that his power and authority come from Satan not from God, from Holy Spirit. And whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin.

Now this remark, directed at the teachers of the law saying that Jesus's power is Satanic has caused no end of grief to a great many Christians, all of whom falsely believe that they may have committed the eternal sin.

But, Jesus says, it is only the sin of saying that Jesus is empowered by Satan and not Holy Spirit which is eternal. And if you were to believe such a thing then you would not be interested in seeking forgiveness from Jesus.

But if you are seeking forgiveness be reassured that Jesus with emphasis says *Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter.* How much more reassurance do we need than this – all our sins and every slander?

To return to the story; Jesus's mother and brothers turn up and Jesus appears to reject them. That he did not actually do so is clear from the story of Mary at the crucifixion and the fact that his brother James led the early church.

Although from Jesus's reaction that does not seem to be the relationship here. Here the family appear to want to take ownership of Jesus. "He belongs to us." Here is the other piece of bread in Mark's sandwich.

Jesus's associates want to control Jesus and his family seek to own him. But Jesus is not for either. He has already rebuffed control from the teachers of the law. Now we rebuff a claim to ownership by saying that those doing God's will – in this case listening to what Jesus has to say – are his family, the people with whom he truly belongs, his brother and sister and mother.

Mark's sandwich is complete.

So, what is the Spirit saying to the church, to us, today? Mark's original purpose – which still stands – is likely to be to emphasise that Jesus is the Son of God. The whole of Mark is one bigger sandwich. In the very first verse we read *The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God*. And at the crucifixion we read *When the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'*

But, for us, there is also the message not to try and mould Jesus into our own image – how we would like him to be, or even how we have been wrongly taught him to be – not to try and control him, perhaps through our prayers, nor to take ownership of him, perhaps by selective reading of scripture, to fit him into the image we choose for him.

He is, after all, quite simply the Messiah, the Son of God.

Amen.

Chris Shaw
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