210607 Mad, bad or God?

**Sermon preached for the Diocese of Guildford on Sun 6th June 2021, Trinity 1**

**Mark 3:20-35**

Then he went home; **20**and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. **21**When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’ **22**And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebub, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’ **23**And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, ‘How can Satan cast out Satan? **24**If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. **25**And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. **26**And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. **27**But 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; **29**but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin’— **30**for they had said, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’

**31**Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. **32**A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=mark+3%3A20-35&version=NRSVA#fen-NRSVA-24318a)] are outside, asking for you.’ **33**And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ **34**And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! **35**Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’

If you came hoping for a nice bible reading, today’s lectionary gospel is not it. If you’ve looking for an heart-warming video sermon, try something else on the Diocese of Guildford YouTube channel. If you’re seeking gentle comfort from Jesus, you’re in the wrong place. Jesus has announced the Reign of God and today we see the consequences. Conflict. And Jesus does not diminish it, he highlights it: declaring, in effect, ideological war. Steel yourselves, folks; this is going to be quite complicated – and it’s not uncontroversial. So here goes, not the final word for sure but my attempt not to duck it but to navigate an uncomfortable text, Mark 3:20-35. John Wesley is reported to have said that the purpose of preaching is to ‘disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed’. Well I don’t know about comfort at all here, sorry! It’s mostly disturbance today.

We’re just 3 chapters in to Mark’s gospel and already people are stirred and stoked. On the one hand there are ‘the crowds’ drawn to Jesus - magnetised by that announcement of God’s reign, and perhaps so thrilled to hear a word of liberation that they don’t notice the chaos. Meanwhile there are others already conspiring against Jesus. Here’s the first mention of the Scribes in Mark – the theological heavyweights who’ve travelled all the way from Jerusalem to shut down this rabble-rouser. And then there’s Jesus’ family, the ones whose job it is to calm the waters, to protect his safety and his reputation. If all these different people are unnerved, so should we expect to be unnerved - wherever we’re standing when we hear that proclamation from Jesus that rocked the world back at 1:15: ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news’.

Just note for a moment the three different groups of people in today’s gospel: first **the crowd,** who can’t get enough of Jesus, and invade his home even when he’s returned to his bubble. Second, **the family** – the ones whose instinct is to protect Jesus from the rabble and riff-raff, who find their table fellowship has been disrupted (v.20), and end up reversing the welcome because Jesus has gone too far – it was ok to begin with but now he’s become fanatical - he should quit this mission (v.21). And finally **the scribes**, the big guns from Jerusalem who commence a counter-insurgency, leading with the charge that Jesus himself is possessed, a strategy to distance and discredit him (v.22).

So what we have here in Mark’s fast-paced action script is a quantum leap from glorious scenes where he’s proclaiming good news and calling disciples and healing demoniacs and paralytics – a quantum leap into tension and hostility. Recall the words of CS Lewis who said that whoever Jesus was no one was left suggesting he wasn’t just a nice guy, a good teacher – either he was mad or bad or God. Well, in today’s gospel we have all those responses neatly arrayed: Jesus’ *family* say he’s out of his mind, he’s deluded, he’s mad; his *opponents* say he’s possessed by Beelzebub, he’s demonic, he’s bad; while the crowd are open-mouthed and wondering aloud if this could indeed be the Holy One of God.

How does Jesus respond? Do we find Jesus the peace-maker minimising conflict and walking away? I think not. He tackles it head-on. With the scribes – the clever ones - he replies ‘in parables’ – a cue for something cryptic, even apocalyptic. Jesus plays them at their own game, and turns their words of antagonism back on them as a riddle and a riposte, ‘*How can Satan cast out Satan? A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, a house divided against itself cannot stand. So if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, his end has come*’ (v.23-26). Amid the parallels and cross-references, Jesus is doing anything but offering platitudes or poetry designed to placate. Jesus isn’t saying ‘there there’ as if to assure the scribes that he’s really their ally against a common enemy, Satan. No, Jesus calls them out, he unmasks their contradictions, he cracks the hard shell of their worldview and undermines it wholesale. This isn’t a moment for reconciliation: rather for naming how the very foundations of the Judaism they claim to defend are collapsing in on themselves.

Satan can’t and won’t ‘clean out his own house’ – it’s up to Jesus to lead the ‘revolt’ against the powers, it’s time to bring their rule to an end (v.26). So here is a declaration of war, ideological war, against the scribal establishment. And in case that wasn’t clear enough, then he likens his mission to a criminal breaking in:

*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* (v.27)

Tying up the strong man! If you recall it was John who heralded Jesus the ‘stronger one’ – as people came out to him for baptism at the river Jordan, ‘*The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thongs of his sandals’* (1:7). Do you hear what’s going on? Mark is revealing Jesus as the stronger one, the one preparing to overthrow the reign of the strong man, in other words, the scribal establishment. And in case you missed that, Jesus concludes with one of his solemn ‘Amen’ sayings:

*‘Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; though whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin’* (v.28-29)

Whereas the Scribes had a complex debt code, Jesus offers blanket pardon. Don’t miss that all-inclusive package, the gospel of total grace and acceptance that precedes the word of exception. The danger is we dwell on the bit we struggle to understand – what exactly is that exception? – and miss the wonderful word of good news, voiced even to the Scribes. The Message translation puts it like this: ‘There’s nothing said that can’t be forgiven. But if you persist in your slanders against God’s Holy Spirit, you are repudiating the very One who forgives, sawing off the branch on which you’re sitting, severing by your own perversity all connection with the One who forgives’. Jesus has turned the tables completely on his opponents: accusing them of aligning against the purposes of God that they claim to defend.

Then Mark brings us back to the family issues with which we started – like a sandwich, with the Scribes as the filling. The crisis started brewing, from the moment when his relatives (literally, ‘those belonging to him’), assume him to be deranged and to put a restraint order on him. But now after Jesus’ militant declaration, they’re confirmed in their efforts: so Mark reports that his mother and brothers are outside the house, summoning him, while the crowd ironically are inside (v.31). All they can see is Jesus courting disaster. It’s lunacy for a marked man to take on the highest authorities in the land. Who does he think he is? So for his own self-protection as well as for the family reputation he must be silenced.

Jesus’ response is a further shock. He not only dismisses the religious establishment but he challenges the social establishment when it comes to the Reign of God. No longer is it the business of the extended family system to determine personality and identity, to control vocational prospects and social contacts. The Jesus revolution involves a new kinship model based on obedience not to the family elder but to God alone. The family unit is redefined by the community of disciples.

Where does this leave you? Nervous or excited? Angry or liberated? I can feel in myself the unease of his family who react out of love and the Scribes who react out of responsibility. It’s as if he’s landed from a red country with a dangerous variant. Surely it would be safest to quarantine him, so we can maintain ‘business as usual’.

And we’re only at chapter 3! So much remains to be seen: how all of this will play out… The only answer is to keep reading, keep watching, keep following: to find out whether Jesus is a leader who truly brings liberation or whether he’s just instituting new tyrannies to replace the old ones. So amidst all that is complicated and all that is disrupting in today’s gospel, please hold on tight to that unbelievable nugget of comfort, the best news there ever was: *Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins, and whatever blasphemies they utter*.