

SUNDAY 6TH JUNE – TRINITY 1 (PROPER 5)

Today is the first Sunday after Trinity and we are now in what the Lectionary calls 'Ordinary Time'. Ordinary Time is most of the Sundays between Trinity Sunday (last week) and Advent Sunday - which this year is 28th November. The powers that be decided that, as there are no major festivals (except for Harvest) between now and November, this is a good time to teach congregations in the basics of Christian Faith. So no pressure for those leading the Services or doing the talks!

I will be honest and say that I find the Gospel passage for today really difficult to understand! Even having done lots of research about it, I still struggle to work out what Mark is trying to tell us. So here goes – I shall try and explain what I think it is all about – but whether I am managing to teach you anything about the basics of Christian faith is another matter!

First the context – the early chapters of Mark's Gospel move at a very fast pace through Jesus's work and the crowds that he is attracting. We are only in Chapter 3 and He is already being followed everywhere and is making enemies out of the local Jewish scribes and pharisees. From the huge number of people following him, He has just chosen his twelve disciples (v 14 and 15 - 'and he appointed 12, whom he also named apostles to be with him and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons.')

And now he has gone home.

And here our reading starts - with the crowd amassing outside and his family feeling rather disgruntled about the disruption to their lives. They

go outside to try and persuade Jesus to stop as his crowd appeal is getting the family a bad name and some are beginning to suggest he is a bit mad, a bit daft. And not only are his family becoming rattled, the scribes are far from happy – they are appalled that Jesus is attracting so much attention and that he is breaking all the rules of their scriptures, by forgiving sins and healing on the Sabbath. They are frightened that they are going to lose control of large parts of the population. And because he is not abiding by the rules they know he must be wrong and they view his power as threatening. For them there are only two sources of power – God or the devil - and Jesus' power cannot be coming from God because he isn't living by the scriptural rules so it must be coming from the devil, Beelzebub.

It seems that both groups – his family and the scribes - are not understanding who Jesus really is. The religious authorities decide he is possessed by Satan and his family assume he has lost his sanity. Apparently, in an ancient setting, this meant much the same thing!

Jesus's response is a parable illustrating that a house divided against itself cannot survive. He points out that everything he has done is good – by his work, madness, evil and sickness are banished. He is doing God's word in actions rather than proclaiming it in words. From the beginning of his ministry, as told by Mark, Jesus has been dealing with issues that could be described as divided houses. He has cast out demons, healed Peter's mother-in-law, cleansed a leper, and caused a paralysed man to walk. The lives of these people are not their own, for the strong man – the devil – has invaded their homes. They live with inner conflict and turmoil, their

minds are divided houses. And the consequence is that they have been physically separated from their community and all that gave them security and identity. Their outer conditions of illness, paralysis, and possession point to the inner conflict; the battle between health and disease, not just physically but, more importantly, spiritually.

Probably, most of us would admit to knowing sometimes what it is like to live divided lives, even though we are not possessed by demons or paralysed. We act one way with certain people and a different way with other people. Life gets divided into bits and can seem fragmented. There is work life, family life, prayer life, personal life, social life and in each area we may think or behave in different ways. The crowd who followed Jesus saw that all that he was doing was good - madness, evil and sickness were being banished and division was being healed.

So far so good – this much I can understand.

But then Jesus says that people can be forgiven for all sins except for one – blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. I wasn't sure what this means but one source suggests that it means that anyone who couldn't recognise the goodness in what Jesus was doing would not be able to recognise the badness of what they were saying. They wouldn't see the need to repent and so would never accept forgiveness when it was offered to them. - it is suggested that this means ANY sin will be forgiven by God as soon as we show remorse – but unrepented sin forms a barrier between our inner self, our soul, and God.

Finally, the last four verses of our Gospel also throw me into confusion! When Jesus's mother and brothers try to call him – presumably back into

their fold – his response is very challenging. ‘Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking at those who sat around him he said, here are my mother and my brothers. Who ever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’”

Does this mean that his mother and siblings are of less value to him than those in the crowd who have followed him, watching him keenly as he heals and banishes evil spirits, listening avidly his words? It seems Jesus is changing the criteria for who constitute his true family. For those inside the house, who want to identify with Jesus and his message, it is good news - it shows that they have their priorities with God. It’s also good news for Mark’s earliest readers who found themselves estranged from their biological families. But, it is less good news for his relatives on the outside, and for the many others with their high regard for ideals of honour and social stability. Jesus is challenging deeply felt cultural assumptions when he determines his true family, not by blood relations or kinship ties, but as those who do the will of God. He isn’t denigrating the family or diminishing the value and significance of family. But He is teaching us that family loyalty is secondary to loyalty and obedience to God our father, who is calling us to be part of a far wider family. I think we are being told that to truly be part of the family of God, we have to put Him first; and perhaps we have to realise that His family and our loyalty to it, is more important than our biological family. And to do this we need to have faith in the reward that will be ours as a member of that family. Trusting in God’s love and support and willingly becoming part of his family, that will enable us to reject the devil and be part of an undivided house.