

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 3: 20 – 35

Health wise, the United Kingdom in the mid-1800s was a dangerous place. One danger was the frequent outbreaks of cholera, an infectious and often fatal bacterial disease of the small intestine, typically contracted from infected water supplies.

London was particularly prone to cholera as the city's waste ended up in the Thames. So you can imagine what the Thames looked and smelt like. The smell was important because everyone, even the medical profession, believed that disease was caused and carried by bad odours, a belief that had held sway for centuries.

But in 1848, a man named John Snow began to rethink the bad smells theory. After thorough investigation, he became convinced that cholera was spread by tainted water. However, the authorities, including the medical profession, didn't believe him. He was castigated, people thought he was mad. Doctors ridiculed him in print. However, in 1866 during another outbreak, city officials, somewhat grudgingly, told citizens to boil their water, and you know what, there has never been another cholera outbreak in London¹.

This story is about long-held beliefs and ways of doing things that were actually detrimental to people's well-being instead of being life giving. Falsely attributing something to something else and willfully ignoring evidence to the contrary. And the opposition that arise when the system was challenged. I told you that story because I like it, plus I see parallels between this story and today's Gospel reading.

To put this story into context, Jesus has just healed a man, on the Sabbath which has aghast the authorities, and appointed twelve apostles, his inner circle. Now he is back home and crowds are gathering, the stories are swirling. And his family are so alarmed by his behavior and the rumours that Jesus is out of his mind that they go out to restrain him.

¹ "Get Well Soon: History's Worst Plagues and the Heroes who fought them", Jennifer Wright, 2017, pp. 127 – 143.

As you know, mental illness was attributed to demonic possession. Jesus' family would have heard of his miracles, attributed to supernatural sources. Did they worry where the power might be from? They are also probably concerned about Jesus's physical safety as he is upsetting people in high places, who are making the effort to travel some distance to observe and criticise his behavior, Jesus is getting noticed.

Jesus' family and the scribes arrive on the scene. A huge, jostling noisy crowd has gathered. Many seemingly possessed would have been shrieking and crying, it was probably utter pandemonium and added weight to all the rumours, heightening their misgivings. The scribes immediately call it out for what they think, or perhaps suits them to think, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons". This is a serious accusation, because it's essentially an accusation of sorcery, which was a crime punishable by death according to Jewish law.

Notice how deftly Jesus highlights the absurdity of the accusation. "How can Satan cast out Satan?" Why would someone knowingly engage in an activity that would weaken and dismantle their own power base. We know that regimes and kingdoms torn by internal strife eventually fall, and are often overpowered by an external force.

Jesus is the external force. Satan may be the 'strong man', the "ruler of this world" as the gospel of John calls him. However, one who is stronger has come. Jesus has broken into this domain of evil, is binding the strong man and plundering his kingdom. Every healing, every demon cast out, every person beginning to follow Jesus and adhering to his commandment of love is increasing the kingdom of God and diminishing the kingdom of evil. That is why the scribe's accusation is so absurd and also so dangerous.

Jesus warns them of this. People will be forgiven their sins and their blasphemies, for God is a forgiving God. "But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin". Some call it the unforgiveable sin. Certain preachers have caused a lot of hurt and angst by taking it out of context and falsely attributing the unforgiveable sin to all sorts of things, especially sex or suicide. But that's not it at all.

As theologians explain, “Since the Holy Spirit at work in Jesus is the agent of salvation, to persevere in denying the presence of that Spirit or in identifying it with adversarial power is to effectively place oneself outside the reach of salvation and so ultimate forgiveness”². God doesn’t place anyone, anywhere, any time beyond the reach of his saving grace. Ultimately some may do that when claiming the works of God to be the exact opposite, ignoring all evidence to the contrary.

I think it poses an important question for us. Where today do we see the liberating work of God done in the power of the Holy Spirit and fail to recognise it, or worse, attribute it to something else? And just like those scribes, what are we denying as the movement of God because it is going against our own long-held beliefs of how things should be done? What are our versions of healing on the Sabbath, what shatters our “this is the way to do things” that leave us so aghast we could be denying the power of the Holy Spirit?

Which returns me to Jesus’ family and their fears. It shows that it’s possible for those seemingly closest to Jesus to misinterpret what he is doing. To misinterpret the working of the Holy Spirit in a person or a situation. As Christians, what can we become so fearful of, that we are swayed by the misgivings of others? Begin to listen to those voices of hostility and alarm, instead of trusting in what we know of Jesus’ character and purpose, loving, healing and unifying?

Jesus has just appointed his inner circle. No doubt they were those he looked at when he declared, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister and mother”. Jesus is declaring that those who do the will of God: trusting in, believing in, obeying and following Jesus, as his disciples are doing, are his family.

For me, and I hope for you, this story gives me pause for thought. About where and how the Holy Spirit may be working within the church, within the world today. And if I am recognizing or resisting that work. I only hope I’m more open and humble than 19th century doctors or 1st century scribes.

² “A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark’s Gospel”, Brendan Byrne, 2008, p.74.