

Mark 3: 20-35 2018

This week's Gospel reading is an incredible passage which is sometimes misinterpreted and often avoided by preachers because Jesus gives us something to worry about when he tells us about the one sin which cannot be forgiven, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. But we'll come on to that in a few minutes, because this short passage reads like a juicy episode of a soap opera, switching from one scene to another.

Mark tells us Jesus has gone home, we presume to Capernaum, and a large crowd has gathered. We know it's all a bit chaotic because Mark make the point of telling us Jesus and his disciples haven't got time to eat. Amongst the crowd is a delegation of teachers of the Law. We know they are important because again Mark gives us some clues and tells us they have come all the way from Jerusalem, which is over 80 miles away and Jerusalem is the place where Jewish hierarchy are based. And, then as if all of this wasn't enough for Jesus to deal with, his family have also turned up to take charge of him, because there are claims he has gone mad, and either they are worried about his welfare, or he is becoming an embarrassment to the family name. So, what do we make of this passage, it certainly isn't an easy read with all this confusion going on and if Jesus

gives us this serious warning about unforgivable sin, we ought to sit up and take notice of it.

Ferry

A couple of weeks ago, our outward journey from Liverpool to the Isle of Man turned out to be quite interesting. When I originally booked the ferry I had the option of booking seats in the premium lounge. It seemed to make sense because the ferry from Liverpool always seems a bit squashed and good seats are hard to find. When we got to the lounge our booked seats were on the opposite side of the table to a young woman and her eight-year-old daughter. As we sat down, the lady said to us, "I hope you don't mind sitting opposite us, my daughter is very well-behaved and is no trouble. It would have been a different story if it had been her brother instead." Anita and I said it was no bother at all and we had a good chat with the lady who lived on the island, but had just spent the day shopping with her daughter in Liverpool.

I thought it was a bit strange at first with the lady been so apologetic about her daughter and telling us she would be no trouble. Then as we got underway an announcement came over the tannoy saying that there was still some seats available in the premium lounge, but children under the age of 16 were not

allowed into that area. I said to Anita, "I wonder if the lady was a little bit worried about her daughter's presence and felt she was a bit of a threat to the premium paying adults." Of course I was delighted to have an eight-year-old sat opposite and wasn't at all threatened by her presence. However, it was a different story and I got a bit nervous when I thought a large group of young leather clad bikers was about to invade our plush, quiet, premium space with their noisy raucous antics. Luckily I don't think they wanted to pay extra for the premium seats and they didn't stay.

Threat

I found it quite fascinating just thinking about the whole situation and my own feelings towards these so-called threats. Of course some people might have been threatened by the presence of an eight-year-old, luckily we weren't. But equally some people would have felt threatened by the presence of young leather clad bikers and I guess those kinds of threats come from personal experience or perhaps from our perception of different people, or even from our own complete miss understanding.

It's interesting how we humans react when we become threatened by other people. One of our defence mechanisms is to put people into groups, to label them, to bracket them and to

put them in a place of our own branding. Chav; Toff; Hoodie; Yuppy are all names we've used to brand groups of people. I've lost count the numbers of times the troublesome young people of Oakworth have been called little scroates and scumbags on the Community Facebook page. Tabloid newspapers can categorise a criminal as a "monster", dehumanising them and distancing them from the rest of society. Giving people a label and putting them in a box goes along with putting them down in some way. It makes us feel superior as we distance ourselves from the sort of threat we feel they represent.

Jesus

This is what seems to be going on as the word about what Jesus has been doing has spread to Jerusalem. After all, if Jesus' own family begin to think he is mad, what is the wider public to make of him? This whole Gospel passage is in fact a powerful witness to the remarkable things Jesus was doing. The early church hasn't made up a story about people saying he was mad, or in league with the devil. People only say those kind of things when the stakes are raised, when something is happening for which there is no other explanation.

The teachers of the law, of course, don't like what Jesus is doing because he is a threat. And so, he must be labelled in

such a way that people will no longer take him seriously. He must, they say, be in league with the arch demon, Beelzebul. But Jesus exposes the illogical nature of their ridiculous claim by pointing out that Satan cannot drive out Satan. In other words if the devil is fighting the devil, then the devil's kingdom is obviously coming to an end. Of course the label they have tried to put on Jesus is wrong, so he offers them a different explanation of what is going on. The stronger one has arrived, and the strong one finds his house being burgled. Jesus' healings, and particularly his exorcisms, is proof that God's kingdom is indeed arriving, the kingdom in which people who have been held captive will be at last set free.

However, Jesus does add a warning, one which is often been misunderstood, about the unforgivable sin in verse 29. This warning about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is rather ambiguous, it doesn't give us any detail, and so Christians over the years have worried about this unforgivable sin and people have misinterpreted it in many different ways. Yet it's quite simple, once you label what is in fact the work of the Holy Spirit as the work of the devil, there is no way back. It's like saying the light of Christ is the work of darkness or attributing God's work to the work of Satan. It isn't as though God gets particularly angry about this one kind of sin. It's rather like, that if you

decide firmly that the Doctor who is offering to perform a life-saving operation on you is in fact the sadistic murderer, you will never ever give him your consent to the operation in the first place. The 'unforgiveable sin' therefore, is blindingly denying the good work of the Holy Spirit by attributing it to the work of darkness and the devil.

Uncomfortable

None of the Gospels shy away from what often makes uncomfortable reading. Jesus faces opposition from those who we would least expect. The religious community and his own family challenge Jesus' character and the divine source of his actions, they are threatened by this new world order when Jesus' ministry brings healing and reconciliation between humanity and God.

It's a gospel reading which brings with it our own challenge. How do we respond when faced with the figure of Jesus, with all his love and power? Do we see the changes it may mean in our own lives to accept him as Lord? We may find our own ways of sidestepping the challenge. Or we might lessen the challenge altogether by watering down Jesus status from Messiah to being "just a good man".

Becoming a disciple of Jesus means letting him be Lord over all. The cost of following him involves moving any priorities that often compete for the first place in our lives. That might mean repositioning the priority we put on our possessions, our status, our wealth, or it may even mean changing the priority we put on friends and family. Jesus certainly didn't shy away from making his calling the main priority and being obedient to his heavenly Father.

Of course, we have the option of rejecting Jesus if making him Lord of our lives is too much to ask - and if we are determined to do so, he will not force us to be part of his kingdom. But if we do accept him as he truly is, the rewards of joining Jesus' family will ultimately deliver more than anything else can ever provide. Looking at those who sat around him, Jesus said, "Look, here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." May we all have the courage to Jesus Lord of our lives. Amen.