

## Sermon for Sunday 9 June 2024

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

***Genesis 3.8-15; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 4.13–5.1; Mark 3.20-35***

Heavenly Father, come by the power of your Spirit. Open our hearts and minds to your word. We pray in Jesus's name. Amen. Please do be seated.

I don't know whether it's just me that has a few strange and weird friends. Is it just me? Probably, but I've got a couple of friends in particular who will phone me up and will say 'De, de, de, de, de, de, de...'; and you go, 'Whoa, hold on a minute. Can you just back up a bit? Fill me in on the information that you've got. That somehow you think I've got, that means you can launch in halfway through the story.' Anybody else find that, when they're talking to people? I've got one friend in particular who phones up and will just go, 'What on earth? What on earth is he doing? He's messing me about.'; and it's a family law situation. 'What? What is going on? What has led us to this point that you're now telling me this?'

Well, I feel the same about the lectionary reading of the gospel this morning, because not only do we jump in at a point where we don't know any background, it even jumps in halfway through what Mark is saying. Turn to your pew sheets and the gospel reading, please.

We start; 'and the crowd came together again so that they could not even eat'. It's actually halfway through a sentence. If you had bibles in front of you, you would know that that is the second half of a section, because at Mark 3.19 it says, 'then he [Jesus] went home, and the crowd came together again'. But even there, what's going on? Then he went home. Went home after what? Okay, let's back up a bit. Let's fill in the background information, because today, as we go through the lectionary readings - we're in Mark's gospel at the moment, we're coming to the end of Mark's introduction to the good news of Jesus, before we begin in chapter four with Jesus's teaching, which starts with the parable of the sower. So at the beginning of Mark's gospel, we have Mark saying, 'the beginning of the good news of Jesus'. We're just going to have a quick overview of the first three chapters.

In Mark, we have John the Baptist introduced. We have Jesus's baptism. We have the Spirit driving him into the wilderness and coming out of the wilderness in the power of the Holy Spirit, and he begins to proclaim the good news about God. He calls the first disciples, and then we learn that he bases himself in Capernaum. Scholars think that Jesus probably had a home there or lodged with somebody there. He's going about Galilee in that region, the northern area above Lake Galilee. He's preaching, he's casting out demons, he's healing. I noticed for the first time in looking at this, where I thought that Jesus was at somebody else's house when he healed the paralytic man that was lowered down through the roof; imagine what would happen if this place was so full that people couldn't get in and they were going up the tower and dropping people into the roof - we'd have a problem with the lead; we might have more leak than we have over there normally. But actually it's Jesus's house where that takes place. That's an aside.

Then they start questioning Jesus about the Sabbath, because the scribes have come up from Jerusalem, they've heard what's going on, and the Jerusalem religious leaders have sent a delegation. And they start questioning him about why he's forgiving sins, because only God can do that. We see the beginning, this tension; God can forgive sins,, Jesus says he's forgiving sins... Only God can do that... He's claiming to be God. So you get right at the beginning of Mark's gospel, this tension that will ultimately lead to Jesus's crucifixion.

He then demonstrates about the Sabbath that it's for man and not for God, and he heals on the Sabbath. And more questions arise. He's healed the man with the withered hand. He goes on a boat trip. There are more healings and exorcisms. And he calls his first disciples. And then he goes home again to Capernaum, and we land where we are. So you know where we are now? You know the background. What is leading up to this confrontation with the scribes?

This is a really dense passage. This has allusions to the whole of the gospel message in just a few verses. In its literary structure; those who like your English, your languages, your literary structure, you may or may not learn a new word today, *intercalation*. Who's heard of intercalation before? If I said to you, 'Marcan sandwich?' No. Okay, let's look at the passage.

It starts with the crowds and Jesus's family. We then have the story, or the account, of the confrontation with the scribes, and we go back to Jesus's family and the crowds. The crowds in the family - the bread of the sandwich; the confrontation - the meat in the middle.

And it breaks down even further. You may want to go home and have a look at this and get coloured pens out. But it starts with the crowd. Then we have the family of Jesus, then we have the scribes, then we have Jesus's parable. And then we go back to the scribes, we go back to the family, we go back to the crowd. And I think it was a few months ago we were talking about this chiasmic structure where you start with one thing, you go to the next, you get to a midpoint and then you sort of go backwards again. And the midpoint is the most important. The most important bit about this account is Jesus's confrontation with the scribes. And he's just been casting out demons, and they come to him and they say, you're using demonic power to do it. I mean, seriously, how ironic is that?

And they're murmuring. Now, throughout the beginning of Mark's gospel, in those three chapters that we see, we hear this phrase, 'The scribes said, the Pharisees said, and they said amongst themselves'; this is an ongoing murmuring. What is Jesus doing? He is doing things that only God can do. He's doing things that really should only happen in the temple. Oh, this is subversive. They've sent delegations to check him out and he calls them out on it.

Do you remember your days in school? For some of us, it's a long time ago. But do you remember when you heard mutterings, you're aware there are mutterings going on, and then one day somebody says something, just out of earshot. 'Do you want to come here and say that to me? Stop muttering in the corner. Come and say it to my face.' That's what Jesus is doing here. This is no sort of gentle Jesus,

meeek and mild, he's hearing the mutterings. He says, 'Come on, let's have it out. Let's have a discussion about this.'

Now, notice they do not question whether or not Jesus is healing people or casting out demons, that is not their question. Their question is about his authority to do it. And they're effectively saying, there's civil war going on. I will not make any statement about the current state of our politics and the lead up to the general election. I'll leave you to make those connexions. There is civil war going. You, the scribes, what you are saying is so ridiculous. You're saying that there's a civil war amongst the demonic powers. Really?

And then he uses this, the power, he talks about tying up the strongman. Who is the strong man, the enemy, the Satan? This is violent language. Jesus is talking about himself like a thief who goes in and burgles a house. This, as I just said, is no Jesus, gentle Jesus, meeek and mild. I don't know what your image is of Jesus. He is talking about plundering a house. He's talking about setting people free. That's what he's been doing; free from their infirmities, free from the demonic.

And again, he may be alluding to Isaiah 49. This is what God says about himself through Isaiah. 'But thus says the Lord, even the captives of the mighty shall be taken and the prey of the tyrant be rescued. For I will contend with those who contend with you. I will save your children.' Jesus is saying, I'm the strongman. I've gone in and I've tied up the strongman; and then I can deal with setting people free. And the hope and freedom is the forgiveness of sins. And what would ultimately happen through his death on the cross and his resurrection, the ability for forgiveness of sins. That is the hope of the gospel, and right here, Jesus is saying, that's what I'm doing, that's what I'm about. What you are seeing in these healings, the demonic being freed from their bondage, is I'm going in, I am tying up the Satan and I am setting people free.

There's a lot we could say about the family connexions. Those on the outside who don't recognise Jesus, those on the inside who do, and the reorientation of family relationships. But the main thing is Jesus stands up to the scribes and says, you've got this wrong. You are missing who I am. And that way you are dishonouring God.

Brothers and sisters, this morning, as we think about this passage, as we come through to communion, what do we think about who Jesus is and what he has done as a result of that? Are we on the outside or do we come onto the inside?

Amen.