

June 9th 2024 -Mark 3: 20-35

There was a strange new religion in town, and two of its founding members were chatting.

‘You know that biography of Jesus I’m writing?’ said Mark to his friend Peter. ‘Between us, we’ve got all the material we need. There’s just this question of how we should handle some of the unpopular bits. ‘What do you mean?’ said Peter. ‘Well, what about that time Jesus’s family realised he’d gone over the edge, and tried to rescue him, and Jesus wouldn’t go with them? Everyone knows that, even after you come of age, if the head of your household wants to see you, you go straightaway. If they want you to come home, you do it.’ ‘His poor mother and brothers, being stood up in public like that! And Jesus was accused by our own religious leaders of being in league with the devil. That’s serious stuff, raises all sorts of questions. Some of our marketing people think we should leave those bits out, to make it more palatable for our readers.’

Well, today’s passage from Mark shows that they reported it all, with no photo-shopping.

Today’s events happen early in Jesus’s ministry. So far, it’s been fair weather. People have been happy to see Jesus heal people from some normally incurable ailments, and they’re flocking to his teaching sessions. But today, Jesus begins to meet opposition from two contrasting groups of people.

The first group to arrive is a party of scribes, teachers of the law who have come from Jerusalem, over 100 kms. away. The religious authorities there had heard some concerning reports of Jesus’s teaching and actions. This deputation of scribes has been delegated to make the trek to Capernaum to find out what’s going on. A big alarm bell was the casting out of demons. The questions that raised for the scribes were a bit different from the questions we might have. For them, the issue is not whether the demons were real, but how someone is evicting them. Demons can be powerful, and logically, Jesus is accessing a power stronger than theirs. So the religious leaders want to know whose power he’s using. In their reasoning, there are two options; One is that Jesus is going over the demons’ head to their boss, harnessing the power of the devil himself. That would put him squarely on the wrong side of the Jewish religious laws, and they can legally deal with him. Their other option is that Jesus is able to access the One stronger than the devil, which could only be using the power of God himself! They’re not ready to face the implications of that, so they decide to accuse Jesus of being in league with the devil. They don’t realise it, but that puts them in very dangerous territory. It’s in this context, where Jesus sets people free by God’s power, and the scribes attribute it to the devil’s work, that Jesus cautioned them very earnestly on pain of their salvation. If Jesus will use the power of the Holy Spirit to set someone free, and if the person refuses that rescue and in effect calls good ‘bad’, there is no other way anyone can help them. So Jesus says, ‘Truly I tell you...whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness.’ You just can’t help some people. Even Jesus could help only those who would accept his help. It’s a bit like if I were lost in the desert with no water, and an Aboriginal tracker finds me. If I’m convinced the trackers have conspired to offer only poisoned water, I’ll refuse it. If I die, it’s because I decided a good man was bad.

Mentioning the unforgiveable sin here leads me to make another comment. -None of our obvious sins we might think of as ‘really bad’ are unforgiveable. Just occasionally, you come across someone in a church who is nursing something in their heart that they once did wrong, They know right from wrong, and they worry it might have been so bad that they’ve committed the unforgiveable sin. The fact that they recognise their action as sin indicates that they haven’t. Please reassure them, if you come across it.

Back to the gospel narrative. The second group to arrive on the doorstep out of the blue, comprises Jesus's mother and at least two of his brothers! You wouldn't think they'd have common cause with the Jerusalem scribes. But sometimes if you're in leadership, you find that different groups of people are bugging you, for different reasons. That can include surprising people. And that's what's happening here. Jesus's family are probably well-intentioned; they have walked the three days from Nazareth to Capernaum on a duty-bound rescue mission to take Jesus out of harm's way. If one of their number went off the deep end, it was clearly the family's responsibility to step in. -Besides, any home-run business depended on keeping a scandal-free reputation! 'Our Jesus has abandoned our good solid carpentry trade to become an uncredentialed healer and preacher. He's obviously lost it, such a pity.'

Mary saw Jesus headed for big trouble. Preaching and healing is one thing, but claiming the ability to cast out demons in God's power, that's another. 'Why is he going to such unhealthy extremes?' They've heard that the scribes have been watching him, and who knows what could happen if Jesus keeps coming to their attention? - And history shows she was partly right in her fears.

Like mothers everywhere, I'm sure Mary would also worry more immediately that Jesus wasn't eating properly. He and his strange group of friends are in demand from all sorts of people at odd hours – remember, it says they didn't even have time to eat. When his family arrive at the house where Jesus is busy teaching, they don't try to go inside. They send in a messenger to get Jesus to come out to them. Out of earshot of his immediate followers, they can summon him home and he'll be socially obliged to go with them. Neutralise Jesus, keep him out of harm's way; that sounds like a plan.

Jesus's response is truly shocking. He doesn't move at first. He looks around his circle of followers and says, 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother. Extraordinary behaviour! But, unlike the interpretation of some extreme cults, Jesus wasn't saying, 'Forget obligations to your natural family. Our church is all that matters'. God made families, and the Bible has several passages where Christians are reminded to provide for their dependant relatives.¹ The family was the principle social support unit. And Jesus is giving all his followers the cultural privileges and responsibilities that go with being family. He is making his family bigger. It seemed strange to them at first. But the early church began to look after their widows, and to take in any orphaned children among them. And in the end, on the cross, Jesus asked John, from the church family, to treat his mother as John's own.

What does behaving as a family mean in our Centrelink-provisioned times? What would a family member do that a household visitor doesn't? At home, I might automatically start to collect up and stack the dishes after a meal. I probably wouldn't do that as a guest. In families, I might suggest better ways to do some of our regular tasks. I probably wouldn't voice that to my host if I were a guest. And we expect others in our family will say what they think, too. Our Christian family is based not on who we are related to, but on who we have a relationship with. And because of our common relationship with Jesus, we are members, not guests, with all the privileges and responsibilities that involves.

Amen

¹ Matt 15: 5, Mk 7:11, 1 Tim 5:8