

Sunday 10th June 2018
Trinity 2 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Genesis 3.8-15
NT: 2 Corinthians 4.13-5.1
G: Mark 3.20-end

“Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me” those of us of a certain generation will perhaps remember that being called across the school playground, the response to the taunts of one child to another. The calling of names, because someone doesn’t fit in or is different often without regard to the impact is sadly still all too common place, what was once the school yard jibe has now become through the use of modern technology and its social media platforms a far more prevalent and pervasive societal problem. It is now far easier, when we don’t understand another person to sling insults in 140 characters from behind a keyboard. Its true that it is far easier nowadays to call out someone with apparent impunity, but this is no modern phenomena. The playground name calling, and the twitter trolling has at its centre the same drivers as the context of this morning’s Gospel reading. The apparent innate human response to anything that is different to our perception of “normality”. This morning let’s take a few moments to put the responses of the crowds, the religious leaders and even Jesus’ family into the context of the kingdom Jesus was bringing into being, a kingdom so far from the “normality” of their life. As an aside it is interesting to note that in the first century, the language of demonic possession was routinely used to describe conditions that we now understand as psychological or neurological disorders. Jesus was bringing into being a Kingdom that would de-stigmatise those who suffered from such illnesses.

In the opening chapters of Mark’s Gospel, vast crowds follow Jesus around Galilee, watching closely as he heals the sick and casts out unclean spirits. Up to this point Jesus’ actions have been greeted with adulation, but now the backlash of rumour and innuendo begins. Is he out of his mind? His own family have their doubts and try to restrain him.

Then the scribes from the Jerusalem Temple weigh in. Fearing that the Romans will sense revolution in the air and ban all Jewish religious practices, they try to discredit him. 'By the ruler of the demons he casts out demons'.

Jesus responds in two ways. First, he highlights their lack of logic. Why would Satan turn on himself? A kingdom or a house divided against itself cannot stand – so Satan would be doomed. In fact, his end has come, but this is the work of God, not Satan. By misinterpreting this, the scribes are blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, which Jesus describes as an unforgivable sin. This much misunderstood verse is often used to manipulate people.

In context, it is about religious leaders failing to recognise the power of God revealed in Christ. Logically, the point is not that God will not forgive them; it is that they are unable to receive God's forgiveness because they cannot recognise God at work.

More importantly, Jesus' second response is to tell the parable of the strong man, bound by one who is stronger the reference to the strong man echoes the prophecy of John the Baptist in 1.7, where he describes Jesus as 'the one who is more powerful'. The battle between good and evil, between Jesus and Satan, is laid bare. And Jesus is revealed as the stronger man who is binding back Satan and 'plundering his goods' – setting people free from the evil forces that dominate their lives.

This graphic image is hugely liberating for those who feel trapped in situations beyond their control. Modern examples might include addiction, debt, exploitative labour practices or human trafficking.

Mark's examples, as the next few weeks reveal, include mental and physical illness, social exclusion, economic disparity, ecological crisis – and even (as here) misplaced familial or religious loyalties.

This is the only story that Mark tells about Jesus' family, and it is not a happy one. Tragically, by seeking to restrain Jesus, they have become a house divided against itself, which cannot stand.

They are now left outside as Jesus defines his new family as 'whoever does the will of God'. Jesus' followers are invited to be a new community who (unlike his own family and the scribes) will recognise what God is doing in him and join him in his crucial work of confronting evil in the world and this is where Mark is pointing us to the earlier reading from Genesis, Genesis 3 sets the tone for the cosmic battle between good and evil that Mark presents in his Gospel. Human beings know that they are caught up in the ongoing battle between God and the forces of evil. The story of the Garden of Eden dramatises this: God confronts Adam and Eve with the consequences of their decision to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Farcically, Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the serpent. Later in the chapter each will be held responsible for the choices they have made. But here God deals first with the serpent who led them astray. Cursed forever, the serpent will slither along the ground. He can only bite the heels of humans, whereas they can strike his head – a far more powerful threat. The clash between the serpent and Eve's offspring can be interpreted as a messianic prophecy about the Son of Man.

In Jesus' conflict with the forces of evil there can be only one winner and that is the key to understanding not just the gospel this morning but the key to understanding the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God being ushered in by Jesus Christ bringing the miracle of healing to the sick bringing the restoration of the God Created world through the defeat of Sin and evil

I know that we don't in the modern church like to talk about that word sin very often and I for one normally cringe when I hear the street preachers laboring the point, of sin but if we are to take anything from this morning it is the understanding that we as Christians are to live as far from the normality of the world as we can be leading kingdom lives that might get us talked about or more importantly get Jesus talked about.

Fr Bill Addy