

1 Samuel 8. 4-20, 11. 14-15

2 Corinthians 4. 16 – 5. 1

Mark 3. 20-35

Last week we read the account from early in the book of 1 Samuel of the word of the Lord coming three times to the boy Samuel in the temple. The word of the Lord was rare in those days, we are told and, as Rod described last week, the culture of the temple at Shiloh, was a problem. Eli the old priest was both dim-sighted and dim-witted, overlooking the behaviour of his reprobate sons. Leaping forward decades, we now find that the boy Samuel is an old man and he is now shamed by the reprobate behaviour of his own sons.

We have lived through a time where so many Christian parents have expected their children to embrace their own faith – and with some hand-wringing and self-recrimination many despair that they have not. Maybe these accounts where the faith of the fathers is not embraced by the sons is reminder that the word of God is not possessed nor controlled nor dependent upon us, it's not about family values, nor our own virtuousness. Maybe the hymn we sing, based on the Jewish Yigdal expresses the freedom of the spirit we heard Jesus tell Nicodemus of a couple of weeks ago:

God's Spirit freely flows,  
high surging where it will:  
in prophet's word he spoke of old,  
is speaking still.

Neither Eli's nor Samuel's sons are religious enough. Jesus' mother and brothers come to drag Jesus away: he has gone out of his mind! He is too religious!

Today's gospel is a bit perplexing. It is difficult to work out quite what's going on and, as with much of Mark's gospel, it moves at an urgent and bewildering pace, so that at any point it's often not quite clear what's going on. Did you glaze over as I read?

The world of Mark's gospel is a starkly divided world; a world with battle lines drawn down the middle with the kingdom of God on one side and the forces of the world on the other. They understood their world as controlled by Satan, by principalities and powers, by demons and forces which enslave and control people against which human powers are impotent. Into this divided world comes the beloved Son. He has the power to control demons, he casts out unclean spirits, spirits who know exactly who he is and his power to save, he forgives sin, he cures the lame, he breaks sabbath rules which hold people in servitude and he speaks with authority, unlike the scribes and pharisees.

So here we are early on in Jesus' ministry. He has just chosen the twelve who are to be sent out already, for *them* to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons. Then, strangely, Jesus returns home. He goes home. But there has already been trouble in his hometown. In chapter 2 when a paralytic is brought to Jesus he first says to the man: 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' Already, this early on, some scribes are sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God

alone?’ But Jesus has set a trap for them, knowing what is in their hearts. He forgives sin first and then he heals the paralytic, just so the religious leaders, and those who are watching, know that he does have power to forgive.

The word of the prophet Isaiah is fulfilled before them:

Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.

<sup>4</sup> Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
‘Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you.’

<sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

<sup>6</sup> then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Between this early event where Jesus heals the man brought to him on a stretcher and Jesus’ return to his hometown, the local scribes, knowing that this Jesus is making a mockery of their world of religious stricture, have sent messages to Jerusalem so that when Jesus returns senior scribes from Jerusalem have now arrived. A five or six day walk for the religious big guns into the back blocks of Israel. They are worried.

The American biblical scholar Ched Myers has entitled his commentary on the Gospel of Mark: *Binding the Strong Man: a Political Reading of Mark’s Gospel*. Although the commentary is now thirty years old, he was at the time writing in a deeply divided America – already divided at that time; today a country with a bristling division down the middle, much of that division drawn down politico-religious lines which are difficult for us, at this distance, to fathom. Yet it’s clear the atmosphere is febrile.

Ched Myers suggests that a saying of Jesus in today’s passage is pivotal for Mark’s gospel to the understanding of Jesus. *But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.* You may recall in Matthew and Luke Jesus speaks of the Son of man coming like a thief in the night, that *if the owner knew the hour the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.*

But Mark’s Jesus is coming to break into the house and bind the strong man, owner of the house, who has the household itself in bondage, and to rebalance the economy of the house toward God’s justice and mercy.

The powers and principalities of Mark’s gospel are embodied in the religious leadership. They hold the population bound in a dualistic universe of good and evil, where they are the makers and shapers of a legalism which leaves people bound in sin and shame; only they can liberate people. And they choose not to. There is too much gain for them in this imagined world they have shaped for people: in prestige, in financial benefit, in honour and deference paid to them and in their

power to shape people's imaginations and lives. People are held in fear. Both Eli's and Samuel's sons abuse their religious power, and instead of being agents of the justice and embrace of God, are simply decadent and self-serving. Likewise, the religious elites of Jesus' time, sons of Israel, are also reprobate. Not because they are Jewish, but because they give into the temptation to imagine they speak for God – in ways that cause living death. In the febrile atmosphere of current American religion and politics we see the pain, the disorder and the corruption when religious leaders pretend to speak for God; and legislate accordingly.

This is why the authority accorded to Jesus by the crowd is such a threat to the religious leaders. They will have their way with him, though; eventually; whipping the crowd into a frenzy, baying for Jesus' execution. Crucify him!

What better indication that Jesus' ministry is seen by the religious leadership as political that the senior scribes are sent all this way to silence Jesus. At this point the best they can do is call him names: *He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.*

It is like the convicted felon Donald Trump, trying to deflect any kind of rational thought about his convictions, making reference to the properly elected president as leader of the "Biden crime family."

Jesus has broken into the house of his hometown and is causing disruption. His family to this point have fallen into line with the social norms of the town, and Jesus' preaching and his ministry are upsetting the balance, the status quo: he's out of his mind. A madman, broken into the house.

Not only does he disrupt the status quo of the town, but as his family calls to him, *he disowns them.* The norms of family which define and control how a person belongs are broken open. We are not talking here of our modern nuclear family; but a family identity and reputation which pivots around the identity of the senior male – honour resides in him and all the family fall into line to ensure honour and not shame are accorded to the patriarch. *Who are my mother and my brothers?* Jesus redefines the kinship of the household of God, the oikos of God, the economy of God which is undergirded by the divine mercy and justice. The family of Jesus' time are defined by honour and shame. Jesus own family are outside the house, bound in fear that he is bringing shame upon their good name: he has gone out of his mind!

The prophet Isaiah echoes:

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
'Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.

The beloved son invites membership of a new order of kinship, under the fatherhood of God. It is a sister and brotherhood where the usual systems of control that too often characterise families are redrawn. The measure of kinship is one where *Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'*

Many of us have lived through a time where the patriarchy began to be broken open. So often family honour was reinforced and protected by father. And if you stepped out of line the concern was that you had brought shame on the family: *what will people think?* I know it was the measure and mantra of what was or was not OK in my childhood home. It can be repressive and stifling.

An understanding of how families work psychologically has developed over the last century – known as family systems theory. The reality is, in families there is often an unspoken agreement about maintaining the status quo, the balance, the family reputation at all costs. Often the status quo is maintained by having a black sheep, a whipping boy or girl who is the cause of all the family's issues; the one most likely to bring shame on the family.

Likewise, I'm always a bit suspicious of churches that proclaim themselves as "the family church". The risk is that the same unconscious and coercive behaviours that often shape blood families are at play in the church "family". The equilibrium maintained by maintaining control.

Jesus ushers in a new model of kinship; of sisterhood and brotherhood shaped by the justice and mercy of God. It is a fatherhood that longs for our freedom and our joy, for our honouring of each other, each as sites of the life of God, seeking to encourage and see the life of God in each other. What can be better than this.

With this image of God, the Father offered and embodied by Jesus, we can see that he is offering those he comes across an utterly contrary image to the image of God projected and enforced by the scribes and the temple system. It seems that the image of God that humans promote is always a vexed one. Too often in our own time the image of God promoted is one utterly contrary to the one offered to us in Jesus. The affirmation of the letter to the Hebrews is that *Jesus is: the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains<sup>2</sup> all things by his powerful word.* The nature of Jesus' personhood is always measure for us of what God is like; he is our yardstick.

In light of this contrast, we might ask some questions about the image of God which the church projects. Is the image offered by the Church judgemental, stern, ever-watchful for the slightest demeanour on our part? As children, too many are exposed to this image of God as omniscient tyrant. Scratch the surface of many adults who have had some time in Sunday School and you will find such an image at play. And this is the nature of God that the scribes of Jesus' time are using to maintain control. I am reminded of the song by the Adeliade hymn writer, Robin Mann, saying what he does not believe in.

## God. Version 1.0

I don't believe in a God up in the sky  
who sits in heaven and never hears me cry.  
I don't believe in a God who's far away —  
I believe in Jesus living here with us today.

I don't believe in a watchmaker above,  
set this world going but now is not involved,  
who from a distance is watching as we fall —  
I believe in Jesus' God who suffers with us all.

I don't believe in a God who keeps a shop,  
who checks each item and puts a price on top,  
who wants a dividend on each investment made —  
God is always giving and refuses to be paid.

I don't believe in a tyrant on a throne  
who wants to punish us for every wrong we've done,  
who keeps a tally of each mistake and crime —  
God wants to have mercy on us  
each and every time.

I don't believe in a patriarchal chief,  
a judge who never had mercy on a thief,  
the Lord and Master who must be waited on —  
God is mother-sister just as much as father-son.

God is beside us, God has no other home,  
no other family, we are God's flesh and bone;  
He-She is with us and with all humankind —  
loving his creation always occupies her mind.

Robin Mann 1991

If Ched Myers is right, and this image of binding the strong man is the pivotal moment in Mark's Gospel, then as we read through Mark between now and November, we can ponder what the opening line to Mark's Gospel means for our own images of God: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. Is our image of God good news and does our being in the world give expression to breaking and entering of God?

As Paul writes to the Corinthians: *we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal*.

This longing to see the reign of God draws us forward, seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. May we see the kingdom breaking in and the joy that can be ours.

Andrew Boyle