

## Mad, bad or maligned? (Mark 3.19b-35)

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After weeks of special celebrations in the liturgical calendar (Easter, Ascension, Pentecost and Trinity), we return to what the liturgical calendar used to call ‘the season of Ordinary time’, and with it, to readings from Mark on the ministry and teaching of Jesus. We might assume this will be a more settled time, but as we’ve just heard in the reading, things are far from settled for Jesus. We’re back to the early phase of his ministry in the region of Galilee, and to date, as Mark describes it, it’s been a rigorous schedule of travel and preaching and public engagement. He’s been mobbed by needy crowds, accosted by demons, and challenged by (mostly religious!) authorities. It’s been demanding and intense. Even when, as we just heard, ‘he went home’, presumably, to Capernaum, *‘the crowd came together again, [and so busy were things] that they (he and his disciples) could not even eat’*.

A rumour gets back to his biological family that Jesus is ‘out of his mind’ (lit. beside himself), and they are clearly worried. Was it a lack of food and rest that was affecting him, or worse, was he deranged (which, back then, equated with being overcome by evil)? The description here suggests that this may have been their concern, since, we’re told, they ‘went out to restrain him’; literally – to seize control (by force). While this is happening, Mark switches focus to another delegation that have turned up, to a bunch of scribes ‘down from Jerusalem’.

Scribes were experts in the Law, and it seems that they too have heard the rumour – that he’s out of his mind. We hear of no interview or examination with Jesus, but they are in no doubt about the problem. ‘*He has Beelzebub*’, they say, *‘and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’* ‘Beelzebub’ was a pagan god associated with Satan (cf. 2 Kings 1.2, 6), so, in

their judgement Jesus is the epitome of evil; Satan in the flesh!! It's a big call and it comes across to me as cheap character assassination; a classic (and literal) case of demonising the enemy. Simultaneously, then, Jesus' family of origin and those authorised to speak of God are casting doubt on his sanity. If you've been on the receiving end of this kind of treatment, you know how undermining it can be – sowing seeds of self-doubt and ruining reputation. Under this kind of pressure, it can be hard to sustain a sense of your own truth.

On this occasion, Jesus refuses to be intimidated. He doesn't always take on his challengers (as we see in his trial) but here, he does speak to debunk the claim. '*How can Satan cast out Satan?*' he says, pointing out the foolishness, the sheer illogicality of the notion. '*If a kingdom... (or a house) is divided against itself, it cannot stand*'. And if Satan is undermining himself, he won't stand either. His end has come. Far from being unhinged, Jesus sensibly exposes the madness of their claim. It doesn't make sense, and it doesn't fit with the evidence. What's happened in his ministry is the exact opposite. Everywhere he's been, people have been welcomed, touched and changed; victims of oppression and evil are being released and restored. All of which shows that the strongman himself (Satan) is the one being plundered.

At this point, Jesus drops the metaphorical language and issues a direct and solemn warning: '*Truly, I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.*' Now, this is a heavy word from Jesus, and it has caused angst and much ink spilling over the years. An unforgiveable sin?? What's he talking about? What does it mean to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit?

Well, to step back for a moment, it's an important principle of biblical exegesis that a passage (any passage) must be interpreted in the light of its immediate context; with regard to the situation in which it occurs. On that basis, this saying must be understood in the light of what's just happened. If that's the case, then blaspheming against the Spirit has something to do with calling good evil, something to do with the unwillingness to recognise or honour the presence of goodness when it's in front of you. To blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is to have such ideologically fixed opinions about who is good and how God will show up, that you attribute to an agent of goodness the title of 'devil'. The problem here is that if you persist in failing to recognise where the good truly lies, then you won't ever realise the evil in yourself and what you need to repent of; you won't recognise your need of God. You will remain stuck in futility – which is to say, 'unforgiven'.

Now, that's all pretty heavy, and in many ways this is an unsettling reading. 'I find this a difficult text to preach', Bonnie Thurston writes, and I'd have to say, I agree. Nevertheless, there is good news here, and the good news is that in Christ, 'the Strongman' has been bound, that God is able and willing to do what Christ himself taught us to pray, namely, *deliver us from evil*. If you feel afraid and oppressed by darkness (without or within) and who doesn't at times, there is one to turn to, who bears light, brings release, and who promises protection.

Well, at this point in the story Jesus seems to have silenced his accusers. They disappear from proceedings, but no sooner does this happen, than his concerned family arrive to take him in hand. '*Then his mother and his brothers came*', Mark writes, '*and standing outside, they sent to him and called him*'. Word is passed on in through the crowd gathered around him and they deliver the message – '*Your mother and your brothers*

*and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’*, Jesus replies, seemingly dismissively. And looking intently at the crowd, and gesturing (I imagine), he exclaims, *‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’*

Now, it has to be said that this response would’ve been as shocking to Jesus’ first hearers as it sounds to us. It seems callous, hurtful. But again, think of the context. This is a passage in which Jesus is having to take a stand for his vocation, not succumbing to the ‘general view’ of him, but being radically responsive to the will of God. And this re-orders his priorities and relationships. Our families can and do make all sorts of legitimate claims on us. Families are important, and Jesus shows and says as much in other places. We do have important responsibilities, we’re called to love and care for our children, to honour parents. Our families matter, but they’re not the ultimate authority when it comes to discipleship.

This whole first section of the gospel amounts to a call to radical commitment. Jesus’ mother and brothers are seeking to subdue him, to divert him from his call; as were the Scribes a few verses earlier, and the Herodians, and the disciples and the needy crowd before that. All had a view of him; all were trying to confine him within the social and religious structures of the day. But Jesus is bigger than that; his sense of God and the possibility of God’s kingdom is bigger than that. He will not be confined or co-opted to their, or our, agendas. His purpose is clear – to do the will of God, and he calls us to the same commitment. Through relationship to him, participating with him, all of us become members of God’s family – his mother, brother, sister. All of us sharing at the same table. We don’t call him out, he calls us in, calls us home – where there is room for all; bread for our hunger and wine for our thirst. **Amen**