

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 31st January 2021
Andy Banks
Mark 3:20-35; 'Jesus: Mad, Bad or God?'

For those with children feel free to access the Godzone video on the You Tube channel in place of this talk and return for the closing worship. We're continuing our series in Mark's Gospel as we fix our eyes on Jesus, and ask ourselves the question Jesus asked his disciples: "Who do you say I am?" And what difference does who he is make to your life? Let's read from 3:20-35.

[Read 3:20-35]

20Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. 21When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'

22And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.'

23So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables: 'How can Satan drive out Satan? 24If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. 26And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. 27In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house. 28Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven all their sins and every blasphemy they utter, 29but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, but is guilty of an eternal sin.'

30He said this because they were saying, 'He has an evil spirit.'

31Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. 32A crowd was sitting round him, and they told him, 'Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.'

33'Who are my mother and my brothers?' he asked.

34Then he looked at those seated in a circle round him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! 35Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.'

[Pray]

Was Jesus mad, bad, or God? C. S. Lewis expanded that "trilemma," in his book, *Mere Christianity*, in which he wrote: "I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." Now, that trilemma features in today's passage.

When Jesus' family heard that he was so busy teaching that he didn't have time to eat, they came to use their family influence to force him to stop – for his own good. "For they said, 'He is *out of his mind*.'" They thought he was mad! His own family – even Mary with all the prophecies she'd heard about him at his birth – did not really understand God's agenda for his Son! It was a *loving* act, but a *blundering* act. And so it received a gentle rebuke, when Jesus refused to go out to them, but instead identified those listening to him as his true family. Since we hear no more about it, we can only assume his rebuke was heeded.

But the Jerusalem Teachers of the Law were a different prospect altogether! Theirs was not a well-meaning, but misjudged concern for Jesus' welfare. Theirs was a calculated, bitter and pre-judged attempt to discredit Jesus, and so

to silence him. To charge Jesus with demon-possession (or demonisation) – indeed possession by Beelzebul or Satan himself – is about as serious an accusation as they could possibly have made against him! And it followed on from their reactions to his healings at the start of this chapter. They saw his compassionate, good, Holy Spirit-empowered work of liberating people from the terrible stranglehold of demonisation, and they wilfully chose to see and declare that power to be *evil*, not good.

And Jesus is incensed, not for himself, but for the third Person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit – against whom this blasphemy was spoken. And probably he’s mindful of the potential of such poisonous words to turn the listening crowd away from him, and therefore away from saving faith. So first, he mitigates against the potential damage of these words for those hearing them, by exposing their utter illogicality. Any kingdom or house that is turned against itself is going to fall – and quickly! If Satan really is fighting Satan, then he’s an absolute idiot! And he isn’t that – he’s cunning, clever, knows exactly what he’s trying to do, and who he’s trying to tear down.

Then Jesus issues a damning assessment of the Teachers of the *Law’s* hearts, and therefore of their future! Theirs is a sin that can *never* be forgiven, neither in this world nor in eternity! And because this “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” is declared “unforgiveable,” there is many a Christian who worries that *they* might have committed it unintentionally. But you cannot *unintentionally* commit this sin, and if you’re *worried* you’ve committed it, by definition you *haven’t*. For, to commit the “unforgiveable sin” is to deliberately and persistently reject God’s means of salvation, which is Jesus Christ, hardening your heart to who he is (as proved by the Holy Spirit’s power working through him) to the point of no return.

Why is that “blasphemy against the *Holy Spirit*”? Because the Holy Spirit’s primary role and desire is to glorify Jesus by revealing to people’s hearts his true identity as God and Saviour, thereby generating saving faith in him. That’s why he worked healings and freed people from demonisation through *Jesus*, and why he still does those things in *Jesus’* name today. But the Teachers of the Law, by their pre-determined declaration of his work as demonic, so hardened their hearts that they became incapable of repentance and faith in Jesus – like Pharaoh in the Old Testament. And, since there is no other means of forgiveness that God offers to humanity except through faith in Jesus, their hardness of heart against the Holy Spirit’s work in Christ made them unforgiveable.

So, Jesus was neither mad as his family thought, nor evil as the Teachers of the Law claimed. What, then, *should* we make of his rescue of people from demonisation? Jesus doesn’t leave us guessing, but tells us clearly what is happening: one far stronger than the strongman has come. Now, humans surrendered their strength to Satan when they submitted to his temptation, and since that first sin only one Person has had the strength to bind him and plunder his house – God himself. But the incredibly good news is that he *has* bound Satan and *is* plundering his house! Therefore, if we are in Christ, we need have no fear of Satan. He can have no power over Jesus’ followers that we ourselves do not permit him. Oh, he can tempt us, but he cannot make us sin. He can test us, like he did with Job, but only insofar as God permits him in order to prove our faithfulness to God. He can work through godless people, ideologies, beliefs and lawmakers to make life incredibly hard for Christians, but he cannot control how we respond to such hardships!

Satan can only gain a foothold in our *lives* if we let him! Because he has been overpowered and bound by Jesus’ death and resurrection. As Paul declares in Colossians 2:15, “having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Christ] made a public spectacle of them, *triumphing over them* by the cross.” One of the insights I most appreciated from the Freedom in Christ course is that, of the three enemies of Christian faith – the devil, the world and the flesh – the *easiest* to deal with is the devil. We simply command him, in faith, in the name of Jesus, to leave and he has no choice but to obey. The *hardest* to deal with is actually our own flesh – our *own* sinful desires, our *own* ungodly thought patterns. This is where we can actually give the devil a foothold into our lives, and into our collective life as a church, from which he can attack us.

In particular, Paul says, we can give the devil a foothold by refusing to forgive, or by letting the sun go down while we are still angry (Ephesians 4:27). Unforgiveness is so easy to miss, or to pretend to ourselves that we are powerless to change. Because, if we have something to forgive, by definition we have been hurt, often badly hurt. And the person responsible for that hurt may never have owned their wrong, nor apologised for it. They may even still be carrying on. Why should we forgive when forgiveness is so undeserved? But the truth is forgiveness is never deserved. None of us deserved *God's* forgiveness, either.

Also, we don't forgive to excuse the other person's actions or to free *them* from what they have done. We forgive primarily to free *ourselves* from continuing to suffer what they have done. It's a well-worn phrase, but true, that unforgiveness is like drinking poison and hoping the other person will die. Of course, forgiveness may or may not lead to reconciliation and should not be misinterpreted as a requirement to stay in an abusive or destructive situation. Rather, to forgive is the wilful choice to leave justice in the hands of God and therefore to let go of the hurt.

But forgiveness prevents the devil from gaining a foothold in our lives. And furthermore, it prevents him from gaining a foothold within the community of God's people, the Church. It is noteworthy how Jesus radically redefined the word "family" in this passage. Family, for Jesus' followers, is only *secondarily* defined as those who are our blood relations or to whom we are joined through marriage. Primarily, our family are with those to whom we are joined spiritually – our brothers and sisters in Christ.

One of Satan's oldest and most successful schemes is to turn the family of God against one another through unforgiveness – to create the sort of *divided* house that Jesus warned cannot stand. The antidote to this is first of all to forgive one another from the heart, and secondly for each of us to work to the best of our ability to live and act and speak in such a way as to maintain the unity of the Church. When our eyes are truly fixed on Jesus and on our commission to spread his Gospel, that unity tends to be maintained. Generally, it is threatened when people allow their *own* agendas or preferences to take emotional precedence over the work of the Gospel. So, I pray that love and unity will increasingly characterise how we, the family of God, are known. For Christ's glory. Amen?

[Pray]