

## A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Linton 8 am

Proper 5B

10<sup>th</sup> June 2018

(2 Corinthians 4.13-5.1)

Mark 3.20-35

### Disturbance

Today's Gospel stands as a sharp contradiction to any idea we might cherish that our faith is a comforting blessing upon a quiet and conventional life; it raises in the sharpest way possible issues of madness, possession, family conflict, and something which can never be forgiven. And Jesus is the focus of it all. If we follow him as disciples, we follow one who sails in dangerous waters, and we may, too.

I'd like to quote from a Dutch pastor, Nico ter Linden, who handled the Scriptures with a story-teller's sensibility. Commenting on this passage he says: *'Tradition has made Jesus a dear, civilized, rather soft man, a fragile figure in white with gentle eyes and a sweet voice who lays hands on people devoutly and tenderly. But that's a romantic caricature, In that house in Capernaum there must have been a stench of putrefaction and blood, of sores and of the sweat of those who had travelled for days to get to the man of God. There must have been wailing and moaning in pain and sorrow...How are we to imagine him in the midst of these wretched people? We are told that he was moved*

*'to his guts' on seeing this boundless suffering. He was a tormented man, in a life-and-death struggle with the kingdom of the devil, fighting for the healing of God's precious children.'*\*

ter Linden goes on to portray Jesus healing with such intensity,, *'praying with all the power that was in him, ...he must have been in a trance. He was possessed by God.'*

Well, we don't know if Jesus did seem to be in a trance when he healed, but that thought gives an understandable context for the accusation made by scribes who came down from Jerusalem: that he was indeed *possessed* – but not by God: by Beelzebul, the prince of demons.

However, let's step back a bit in the story, before we come to that accusation: let's step back to Jesus' family, coming to take him away. This is one of the most painfully poignant moments in the Gospel story. We can feel for his family at several levels.

If we were to read this passage not off our Red Top sheets, but out of a Bible, we would see that a little phrase leads into the point where our passage came in" the phrase is *'Then he went home...'* (Mark 3.19b). *'Then he went home, and the crowd came together again so that they could not even eat...'*

Where had Jesus gone home to, in this story? To the house of his mother and siblings in Nazareth? No! That

was where they had to travel from to try and fetch him. The home he'd gone to was one that Jesus had adopted for himself in Capernaum – possibly the house of Peter's family. He'd made the break with his birth family. He'd moved away. And that was highly unusual in his society. Even in ours, where young adults are generally socially mobile, and we may even want to encourage them to leave home, it can be a wrench when we know they've gone for good. Especially if they go far away, or show no sign of making regular trips back to see us or to keep in touch.

So, that's one level of poignancy that we can relate to. Then there's the family's concern for his welfare. Did you notice that the first verse of the reading told us that he was so besieged by crowds that he and his disciples didn't have time to eat? Maybe word of how intensely he was working had reached Mary: certainly, I think, news of the crowds who were gathering around him must have done. Remember, although Galilee was ruled by Herod, it was still effectively part of the Roman Empire. Neither Herod nor his Roman masters were very sympathetic to unauthorised mass gatherings which they couldn't control, and their response could be brutal. And finally, of course, there was the nature of what was going on in the heart of these crowds: all sorts of scary sick and mad people pressing in together: the shrieking of demoniacs, the grabbing at clothing, the loose women pressing in...

How understandable to think that Jesus must have been out of his mind, and needed rescuing from himself! Even in much less extreme circumstances, many a parent through the ages has been alarmed, or at least grieved or offended at the path their offspring have chosen to follow. Even something as peaceable and orderly as becoming a monk or a nun has caused a huge emotional rift between children and parents: how enormously hard it is to let the young go and find their own vocation, however unlikely and apparently disadvantageous. How very difficult to give up the notion that parents know best...

So, the poignant scene was set – Mary and her other children standing outside, and sending in a message to Jesus: he should come out. He should come home – to his real home in Nazareth. But he doesn't even appear in the doorway to speak to them. He stays where he is, inside the house, and looks at the crowd in a circle around him: *'Who are my mother and my brothers?...Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother!'* (Mark 4.33,34).

St Luke tells us that Simeon had prophesied, in Jesus' infancy, that because of him, a sword would pierce his mother's heart... I don't think she had to wait for the crucifixion to have that experience.

But, one other point about this family which seemed so spurned: they were standing *outside*. They were calling

Jesus to come *out* and leave the ministry he was convinced was his. But there was nothing to stop them from coming in. They could have entered the circle. At this point, they were excluding themselves.

We have very indication that later on, Mary did come in, and at least some of his siblings. His mother did join the circle of those who followed him – all the way to Jerusalem and Golgotha. And beyond that, too. She was in the inner circle who waited and prayed until the Spirit came and set them on fire to go out, as Jesus had gone. And it seems his brother, James, too was an active disciple: maybe he was the James that Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15 had his own personal experience of a resurrection appearance. He certainly became a leader, and authority, in the early Church in Jerusalem, according to Acts –and closeness to Jesus in his ministry, and witnessing the Resurrection, was a defining characteristic for such early leaders.

So, following Christ isn't in essence a family-breaking choice, but it can certainly test families, because it demands a priority of commitment, even over the claims of kinship.

But let's return briefly now to those scribes who'd come down from Jerusalem –the ones who said Jesus was possessed by the devil. They seem to have come as an investigative deputation, their minds already more than half made up. Only so could they have made such a rupture between the good their eyes could evidence - as

ter Linden puts it: *'Jesus has entered the house of this world. In single combat, he has resisted the devil to his face, bound him fast, chained him, gagged him. Now he's busy casting out those demons who are still in residence. And the people who were in the grip of these demons can breathe again; healthy, they can go their way.'* This is what an unbiased observer could have seen. The crowds in general saw it, and were amazed. But the scribes with their pre-set minds refused to see it. They called good 'evil'; they would prefer suffering to continue, if its alternative was massive disturbance to their world and their way of thinking.

The sin against the Holy Spirit must lie somewhere here, in such a wilful hardening of heart and blinding of the eyes to goodness happening in people's lives.

But did Jesus actually say that this sin was unforgivable? ter Linden suggests that these may be the words of the Christian communion reacting maliciously to the malicious charge that their master was a minion of the devil. Who knows?

But we can certainly be moved to ask for grace in our own lives, to keep our hearts soft and our compassion warm to recognize good where it comes to release people, and not to get destructively set in our thinking.

\*Quotations from Nico ter Linden, *The Story Goes...Mark's Story and Matthew's story*, SCM Press, 1999, pp.37-39.. (Published in Dutch in 1998)