

Mark 3: 20-35

Pymble 10.6.18

How Jesus sees his ministry

After a bit of an excursion over the past couple of weeks, we're heading back to Mark's gospel for at least the next few Sundays. And in today's 15 verses we have, I think, Mark's first *sandwich construction*.

This is a favourite technique of Mark's where he sandwiches one story in between the start and finish of another, and in doing so, invites us to interpret each in the light of the other.

The theme of both stories is *reaction to Jesus* – from his family and from the religious authorities – and in the midst of responding to these flawed judgements Jesus reveals in stark and surprising terms just how he understands his ministry.

Incidentally this is a challenging text for some Catholics who elevate Mary and desire to perpetuate her Virgin status.

Yet this gospel, which knows nothing of Virgin Births or other Christmas stories, here speaks of Jesus' *sisters and brothers*, and what's more, it speaks of Jesus' family, including Mary, in rather unflattering terms.

The original text can be translated in a variety of ways but it is best read as *his family* wishing to restrain him for *they felt* he was besides himself.

That is, in *their* judgement, not that of anonymous others, Jesus was mad or out of his mind.

They come to this conclusion because, so busy was he with the crowds that at times Jesus even forgot to eat.

Di seems to get that busy at school sometimes, but I can tell you, if ever I start skipping meals, then you really should be concerned for my mental health...

But for Jesus' family, this extreme busyness and perhaps over-investment in the lives of others, indicated that he was out of balance and needed some sort of restraint. Other translations suggest they were going to *take charge of him*. It may have been genuine concern for Jesus' welfare but we cannot also exclude some concern for their own family reputation which was a very important part of that culture.

Either way, according to Mark, Jesus' family did not understand him.
More of that part of the sandwich shortly.

The other characters in this scene are the religious scribes.
It seems they have been sent from Jerusalem to "check out"
this preacher and wonder worker who was pulling such large crowds.
And their blunt assessment was that Jesus was casting out demons
only by the power of the prince of demons;
that is, they were claiming that Jesus only had such control
over the demons because he was Satan himself
or very closely associated with him.

Jesus has a biting 2-fold response for the scribes:
Firstly he claims their assessment is illogical:
in 3 little parables he pointedly asks,
why would Satan undermine his own work?
And secondly he claims their suggestion is unforgiveable.
To call the liberating work of God's Spirit
in the life of a troubled person, Satanic,
is to call white, black, and black, white;
It is to confuse the work of God with the work of Satan.
The scribes are on dangerous territory.
I don't think they were expecting such a sound and logical response
from this local preacher from the sticks.

It is then that Jesus adds this enigmatic statement about
home invasions and tying people up in their own homes.
Perhaps it is even stranger when we realise
Jesus is speaking of himself as the one entering the home
and doing the tying up.
Yes, in Jesus' mind, this is what his ministry is about.
He is entering Satan's territory and binding Satan's grip on the world
in order to bring liberation and freedom to people.
Far from being in cahoots with Satan, as the scribes had suggested,
Jesus ministry is confronting and overcoming
Satan and his control on the world.

This is a surprisingly combative view
of the works he was performing.
Jesus was not *just* making people better or casting out evil spirits,
he was overcoming the work of Satan in people's lives.
In his healings and exorcisms, and perhaps in his teaching ministry also,
Jesus understands his actions
something akin to guerilla warfare in enemy territory,
except the only danger and disturbance he brings

is to the enemy's hold on people's precious lives.

Now, in the first century this worldview was common;

demons were under every rock, as we say,

and were the cause of every misfortune.

We don't expect Jesus to think and act totally contrary to his culture.

Even so, Mark stresses this understanding of Jesus' ministry

more than the other gospel writers.

Mark wants us to hear that there was something particularly

confrontational and successful about Jesus' ministry in regard to evil,

and he wants us to know that this is part of the good news for us.

So what do we do with this in our 21st century
scientific and post-modern world?

Well, I don't think it is as irrelevant as we might first imagine.

While we might not see the fingers of Satan
behind every personal struggle or social problem

I think we do understand them

as the complex results of many unseen factors.

In the individual's realm,

when we consider alcoholism or other addictions,

mental illnesses, relationship breakdowns,

personality disorders and a host of other conditions

we realise these are not simple one-cause issues

but a complex combination of biology, family history,

psychological make-up, cultural expectations and more.

And when it comes to social evils as varied as poverty,

public ill-health, homelessness, institutional excesses,

or a breakdown in accepted communal values

we understand these are the result of multifaceted systems,

government policies, historical factors and more.

My point is that there are complex unseen forces at work

for many of the troubling situations

we face as individuals and as a society.

And perhaps Jesus' ministry even now,

is confronting and challenging those forces –

be they poor government policies

unhealthy attitudes

or poor perceptions of our humanity –

in order to bring freedom and life to those who suffer.

Even for us as we live our daily lives – our diet, our work habits,

our relationship stresses, our sense of poverty or privilege,

our finances, our success or otherwise at making wise choices

– perhaps we are more bound than we even realise.

Sometimes it is not until we are free
that we understand just how much we have been enslaved.

Well the narrative turns back to Jesus' family –
the bottom bread slice of the sandwich.
They are standing outside with the crowd
while Jesus teaches those in the house.
He gets word that they wish to see him.
But surprisingly he ignores their request and instead
looks around the room and declares as family members,
those who do the will of God.
In this family dominated society,
Jesus' mild public rebuke of his mother and siblings is quite astonishing.
Perhaps mindful of their earlier desire to take charge of him,
Jesus appreciates afresh the closeness and loyalty
of those who understand him better,
who follow him and listen to his teaching.
And as we know, family can exert some unhealthy pressures at times.

Jesus' reframing of family relations does not suggest
a wholesale withdrawal of divine approval of family
but it does emphasize the importance of understanding
Christ and his ministry.
Put simply, Jesus is doing the will of God,
and he declares a strong common bond with those who do likewise.

As we put Mark's narrative sandwich back together we ask,
what insights do we gain from having the 2 stories in this way?
There is the common motif of misunderstanding of Jesus.
Both his family and the scribes do not comprehend
who Jesus is and what he is about,
though the latter's misunderstanding is far more grave.
But constructing his story in this way
Mark is able to make two clear claims about Jesus' ministry
and the ministry of those who follow him.
One: the centrality of doing God's will, and
two: that that divine will is centred on liberating people
from that which binds them,
be they personal demons, the chains of poverty or some other evil.

This is where, as followers of Jesus, we gain our direction for service.
We are to be those who work for the freedom
of those who are bound in all sorts of ways.
And we realise that in doing so, like Jesus,

we may be misunderstood or even called mad;
other religious people may even think we are in cohorts with the devil.
But if we are clear on what we are doing and why we are doing it,
then we will have the blessing of being called
Christ's sisters and brothers.
And that is a beautiful gift!