

Mark 3:20-35 | Sermon 'Jesus our Lord and Brother'

Genesis 3:8-15 / Psalm 130 / 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1 / Mark 3:20-35

Preached on 9 June 2024 at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide by Pastor Tom Pietsch

Heavenly Father, guide us as we receive your Word, that we may be renewed in our adoption as brothers and sisters of your Son Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Family Intervention

Our Gospel reading today begins with a family intervention. You know the sort of thing – a case where concerned family members step up to the plate to help another family member out. It might be to tell them some hard truths, warn them about a path they're going down. Or perhaps an intervention to try to save someone from a bad situation they're in, perhaps with predatory people about.

Today's intervention is Jesus' family, literally in the Greek his "own", coming to restrain Jesus. Mark tells us that they do this because first they heard that Jesus was so swamped in a home that people couldn't even eat. And secondly because people were saying that Jesus was out of his mind. Perhaps Jesus' family were thinking that Jesus' ministry was getting out of hand. Enough is enough. Perhaps they agreed that Jesus was out of his mind. Perhaps they were worried about the attention that Jesus was getting. Perhaps other people were telling the family that they needed to step in, that Jesus was their responsibility to address.

They don't manage to restrain him. Or take him away. In fact, we don't immediately hear what happens. Our Gospel reading begins with Jesus' family, and ends with Jesus' family but sandwiched in between is Jesus' talking with the scribes. So we'll come back to Jesus' family later on.

The Judgement of the Scribes

Mark tells us that scribes have come from Jerusalem to Jesus' home town, apparently to investigate Jesus. They want to stage their own intervention, too, and perhaps this is exactly the kind of official attention that made his family want to step in. The scribes pronounce a judgement, declaring that Jesus himself is demonic, using demonic power to cast out demons. Why would they think this? Well, twice already in Jesus' ministry, according to Mark, unclean spirits have spoken to Jesus. One unclean spirit called Jesus "the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24), and then others had fallen down before him and shouted "You are the Son of God!" (Mark 3:11). As the scribes had been watching Jesus for a while, these accounts could have informed their judgement that Jesus was in league with the unclean spirits, the demons.

Jesus gives three responses to this judgement.

Response 1: How can Satan cast out Satan?

The first response is a matter of logic. How could Jesus be demonic, if he is casting out demons and so opposed to them? In Jesus' words, he asks: "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand." But Jesus has been doing good – he has been healing the lame, and freeing people from unclean spirits – so he cannot be cooperating with evil, but is the enemy of evil.

Just because the unclean spirits cry out that Jesus is the Holy One of God and the Son of God does not mean that Jesus is on their side. They acknowledge his power. The underworld knows who Jesus is. But they don't joyfully submit to his power, they live in fear of it, in rebellion against it.

Response 2: Binding the Strong Man

In the second response to the scribes, Jesus strangely gives advice on how best to rob a home. The key, he says, is not to go after the goods you want to steal straight away. First you need to nullify all threats, disarm the householder, and then you can go about plundering his property with freedom. *"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."* (Mark 3:27) Now, this might be good advice for robbers, but Jesus is clearly speaking in a parable, as Mark has announced (Mark 3:23), and not commending stealing. Well, he *is* commending stealing, but only of a unique sort. In this parable, we can understand Satan as the strong man, and his property are people that are in his power. Jesus has been releasing people from Satan's grip, casting out unclean spirits, forgiving the sins that held people in Satan's power. And he could have done none of this without disarming Satan. In answer to the scribes, then, Jesus is not in league with Satan, but rather Satan's worst nightmare. For he has bound him up, and defeated him. He defeated him when he was tempted in the wilderness, and he is on the path to defeat him once and for all by his death and resurrection.

In the baptism rite of the Lutheran Church of Australia, there is often included a rebuke of the unclean spirit in which the pastor says: *"Until Christ claims us in baptism through his Holy Spirit, we are under the power of the devil. Therefore I say: Depart from [this person], you unclean spirit, and make way for the Holy Spirit, in the name of the Father + and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit +."* And then after those words are said, God does his work in baptism of rescuing people, rescuing you, reclaiming the property that first belonged to him, and giving new birth to you his beloved child, into the kingdom of God. A divine family intervention, Christ rescuing you when you were lost, and taking away Satan's power over you, and restoring you to the kingdom of God, full of grace and truth.

Before the first baptism I ever conducted as a pastor I met with the couple bringing their first child to the font. They were irregular church goers, and I sheepishly mentioned that saying a child is under the power of the devil might seem a bit extreme. But this couple corrected me, and said this was precisely why they were bringing their child to be baptised. The mother said to me something like: "There is a lot of darkness in the world. We want our daughter to be covered with the power of God." A power that is stronger than anything the devil can muster. Well, there remains a lot of darkness in the world, but in your baptism you have been rescued to live now in the light of Christ.

Response 3: Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

The third response Jesus gives is a warning, but with a promise. Let's hear it again: *"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 – for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'" (Mark 3:28-30).* This is a verse that people can stumble with, so it is good to give it some attention. Jesus' point here is not that there is a limit to God's mercy, and he says as much in verse 28. For some reason the NRSV translation does not include the word 'all', so the Greek text is even stronger. *"All sins will be forgiven... and whatever blasphemies."* Every other translation I looked up rightly includes the word 'all'. The fountain of God's mercy is abundant and can forgive all. But imagine that you blocked off that fountain – that you didn't want forgiveness in Jesus' name, and went so far as to say that Jesus has an unclean spirit? That you attribute to evil the very good works done by

Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit? That's the warning. That instead of letting Jesus our brother intervene in our lives, we seek to intervene in his life, blocking him. But the promise is that there is no limit to God's mercy as we seek it, that all sins will be forgiven. His grace is sufficient to cover everything.

Jesus our Lord and Brother

Having given those three responses to the scribes' accusation (Satan cannot cast out Satan, the Strong Man is tied up, and a warning about calling Jesus unclean), Jesus then addresses the topic of his family again. His mother and brothers are standing outside the home and calling Jesus, which the crowd inside relays to Jesus. *"Who are my mother and my brothers?"* Jesus asked. *"And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."* (Mark 3:33-35).

God has put us all in a family, with a mother and a father, with relatives. And, of course, we are commanded to honour our parents, and to provide for our relatives (1 Timothy 5:8). But there are stronger bonds that we have than our blood relatives. For you have been adopted into a new kingdom, a new family, with Jesus as your Lord and your brother. As Christians we are not ultimately bound by our family, or defined by them. Instead we are defined by Christ, by his righteousness, by his intervention to claim us in our baptism.

This can sometimes cause friction with our families. Perhaps sometimes people would like our ultimately loyalties, and we can imagine that Jesus' family felt that friction after he spoke in this way. But there is beautiful coda to this episode. For later on in the New Testament, we hear that as well as Jesus' Mother, Jesus' brothers also came to confess Jesus as Lord. Just after Jesus has ascended into heaven, the Book of Acts tells us that all of the 11 disciples come together in Jerusalem. *"All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers."* (Acts 1:14; see also 1 Corinthians 9:5, Galatians 1:19).

All sins will be forgiven. They have been forgiven among us. They were forgiven Jesus' brothers. And God has power to save all people. For Jesus has cast out Satan, has bound him up, and his power is coming to an end. But the reign of Christ has only just begun and will endure forever. And this King and Lord has intervened in your life, and now calls you his brothers and sisters. All glory be to God.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.