

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 10 Year B 2018

We now find ourselves in the 'green Sundays' of ordinary time, or the 'Sundays after Trinity. And we recommence (as we had before Lent) our systematic journey through the Gospel of Mark, the shortest and earliest of the Gospels. But even if it is more concise and briefer than the other Gospels, it no less significant and presents a robust theological schema. Now, the gospel reading placed before us today is an example of a discrete unit within Mark's gospel even though it appears to have some rather disparate, unrelated elements. In fact, what we have before us today is a classic example of what is known as a 'Markan sandwich': two literary pieces of bread with something meaty in-between.

The pieces of 'bread' in the gospel portion today relate to Jesus' family. The first little part highlights the failure of Jesus' natural family. The second piece of bread, which ends the passage today, has Jesus point us toward what we might call his 'true family', with the idea that true belonging to Jesus does not depend on blood relation. And the meat between these two is the accusation of the scribes, that Jesus has a devil within him, hence his power over the demonic, and this in response to earlier in the chapter in which we are told how power over the demonic was such a feature of Jesus' ministry.

So, in this little sandwich we actually have presented to us the question that really lay at the heart of *all* the gospels, the question that they *all* seek to address in one way or another, and the most important question *we* could ever ask: *who is Jesus?* And depending on how we answer that, how do we respond to him? Now, there are only three possible ways to answer the question. And all three we see reflected in some way in the Gospel today. In this, the Gospel writer Mark shows remarkable insight into the human heart and the human mind. Because they are the responses that people *today continue* to wrestle with. Now, the only way we can answer the question, *who is Jesus?* is to say that either he was mad, and so unreliable and not worth bothering with; or he was a liar, and so dangerous and likewise one whom we cannot, indeed ought not, listen to or believe in; or he was who he claimed to be, that is Lord. These are the only options open to us: either he was bad, mad or who he claimed to be; either liar, lunatic or Lord.

As we all know, so much of the western church is now suffering what we might call a 'crisis of confidence'. We so often, struggle to know what to say about Jesus with any kind of clarity or boldness.

And so, we think that perhaps the meeting point - the place of connection between the unbelieving world and the church - is to present Jesus as the ultimate Nice Guy, the Good Man who teaches us to be good. That becomes, even for those in the church, the acceptable/palatable presentation of Jesus. But here's the problem. Here's why - if we deny Christ his Lordship, if we insist he is not really the Son of God, if we depart from the record of Scripture and witness of the church - why *we cannot* say Jesus was a 'good man'. Someone who claims to be God *and is not*, is not a good man, but a bad man! Merely a 'good man' is the one thing Jesus could not possibly be! By claiming to be God he eliminates that possibility. Because a liar (I think most of us would admit!) is not a good man! Someone who lies about his essential identity is a liar, and a mere man who claims to be God has lied about his essential identity.

It is attractive and easy to say that Jesus was neither a bad man nor divine, but instead a really, really good bloke. But to be a liar about your essential identity shows you to be not only untrustworthy, but maybe also dangerous. We would have to side with the scribes and say, 'a devil is in him.' But Christ's power to liberate, to free, to bring life, to those caught in the powers of darkness shows he cannot be in allegiance with the one who seeks to enslave, and keep in darkness. In the parable we are told *no one can make his way into the strong man's house and burgle his property until he has tied up the strong man first*. In the great battle with the demonic powers that are such a feature of this gospel, while the devils may be strong, Jesus, as he shows in word and action, is *the stronger man*. The Prince of Lies cannot resist. Jesus' power is a sign that his word is true, *that he can be trusted*.

Still, if we cannot accept Christ is who he claims to be - the Strong One, Lord - and because Jesus shows himself to be trustworthy, and so not a liar, then the only option left open to us is that he was deluded, mad. We hear it quite bluntly and explicitly today, Jesus' own family '*setting out to take charge of him, convinced he was out of his mind*'. They stage what some psychologist might have called few years back, 'a family intervention.' We could imagine them, saying, '*You've had your fun. Time now to cut your hair, finish your degree or go to trade school*. And urging him to settle down, saying *you're not getting any younger, enough of this religious enthusiasm. It'll never pay the bills*. As many of you have perhaps experienced, approaching religion with any degree of seriousness often inspires a high degree of embarrassment amongst family members and loved ones who do not share our enthusiasm.

Now, either Jesus believed his own claim to be God or he did not. If he did believe it, he was a lunatic. If he *did not* really believe this about himself, but claimed it anyway, he was liar. Which leaves us with the third option, that he was, and is, God. The conclusion that he was either liar or lunatic just doesn't bear up for the simple point of *his character*. Even the most basic and even cynical reading of the record leads us to see that without question he was both wise and good. A lunatic is the opposite of wise. And a liar the opposite of good.

Now, there have plenty of people who have claimed divinity for themselves, who have suffered what is known as a 'divinity complex'. And classically they show the traits of egotism, narcissism, inflexibility, dullness, predictably and an inability to love and understand others as they really are. In other words, the exact opposite of Jesus! So too, his life shows the exact opposite of a gross, manipulative deceiver. In every other way Jesus' life was morally impeccable. He was unselfish, loving, caring, compassionate, passionate about truth and helping others to truth. And what would motivate an evil, selfish liar to die for what he claimed? Liars lie for selfish reasons like money, power, pleasure or fame. Jesus gave all that up and life itself! There is no conceivable motivation for his lie. It brought him hatred, rejection, misunderstanding, persecution, torture and death. In other words, all the characteristics we see at play with mad men and bad men are utterly absent in the life of Jesus.

My friends, the only option left open to us - as faithful, sincere believers have always recognised - is that Jesus is indeed as he claimed to be: the Son of God. Not deluded or deceptive. In the words of the gospel parable today, he is indeed the 'stronger man'. Not in league with the forces of darkness, but the One who has power over them. The consistent record of the scriptures and the witness of those who knew, who had their lives completely transformed by him, who died for love him, all point in the same direction: that he is trustworthy. He shows us that indeed he was good and wise, and so we can believe. We can *trust* what he says about himself because we can *trust him*.

In this age of doubt and confusion our response to Jesus needs to be whole-hearted and full; that we join that great number gathered around Jesus whom he calls his mother and brothers and sisters; that our membership in his family comes from accepting him as what he says he is; that we confess him in the words of the most and ancient and most basic of all Christian creeds, simply and boldly: Jesus is Lord. Amen.