

5 June 2021

Stepping Inside (Mark 3. 19b-35)

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After the excitement (liturgically speaking) of the season of Easter, which has culminated over the last couple of weeks with the feasts of Pentecost and Trinity, this week we embark again on the season of 'Ordinary Time'. This is that part of the church year which falls outside the two great seasons of Christmas and Eastertide, and their respective preparatory periods of Advent and Lent. Traditionally, 'Ordinary Time' falls into two blocks – a few weeks between the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Lent; and then the much larger chunk of time we're entering now, between Pentecost and the beginning of Advent.

For those interested in etymology, the word 'Ordinary' as used here does not mean in the first instance 'uneventful', 'dull' or 'mundane'; rather it comes from the ordinal numbers by which these weeks are counted in sequence. But, given that it designates the period without major festivals, there's obviously a connection with that other sense of 'ordinariness' too. And there's something I love about this – that in the church's year, as in our own lives, the vast bulk of our time is spent not in a heightened atmosphere of tension, celebration or newness, nor in intense experiences of either suffering or joy. Rather, it's spent discerning and living out the ramifications of such experiences, discovering how the ordinary may be changed, transfigured, reoriented by what we have undergone and the meaning we make of it.

As the US Conference of Catholic Bishops puts it: 'Christmas Time and Easter Time highlight the central mysteries of [Christian faith], namely, the incarnation, death on the cross, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Sundays and weeks of Ordinary Time, on the other hand, take us through the life of Christ. This is the time of conversion Ordinary Time is a time for growth and maturation, a time in which the mystery of Christ is

called to penetrate ever more deeply into history',¹ and (I would add) into the fabric of our personal and communal lives.

In terms of the gospel readings set for this period, Ordinary Time brings us back into stories of the ministry and teaching of Jesus. And this week, our reading sets us in the flurry of activity surrounding the beginning of his public life. So far in Mark's gospel, Jesus has been based in Galilee – near his home town. He's performed a bunch of healings, and the crowds are getting to know of him. They follow where he goes and clamour for his attention. To escape the press of people, he has to get up early in the morning and go to a deserted place to pray, and teach from a boat pushed out from shore so as not to be crushed by the multitude. He's attracting the attention of the authorities too. He's enacted a range of provocations – eating with so-called 'sinners' (Mark 1.15), declining to fast with the Pharisees and disciples of John (Mark 2.18), plucking grain and performing healing on the sabbath day (Mark 2.23; 3.5). And in and amongst all this he's deliberately been choosing a band of apostles – twelve of them; another provocative act, suggesting his claim to have authority to re-create the twelve tribes of Israel.

As our reading begins, he's just come down from the mountain where he's appointed the twelve and, we're told, 'he went home'. The crowd presses in again. And then all of a sudden, just as his ministry is really gaining momentum, Jesus faces a powerfully personal undermining of him. His family of origin, hearing the crowd and people saying 'he has gone out of his mind', come out to restrain him'.² And the licensed interpreters of his religious tradition, scribes who've come down from Jerusalem, accuse him likewise of being demon possessed: 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons'.

Here's a test of self-belief if ever there was one. He's seemingly misunderstood by the family that knows him intimately and is supposedly most on

¹ Philip Kosloski, 'The surprisingly deep spiritual meaning behind "Ordinary Time"', *Aleteia*, published 06/05/17 (<https://aleteia.org/2017/06/05/the-surprisingly-deep-spiritual-meaning-behind-ordinary-time/>) accessed 3 June 2021.

² The Greek means 'to take control of' or 'to seize forcibly'. Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2002), p.41.

his side; and he's accused and mischaracterised by those formally authorised to speak of God. If ever you've felt compelled to stand for something, or stand for yourself, in the face of 'no agreement' from your personal authority system, you might know something of this experience ... how hard it can be to sustain a sense of your own truth, how insidious the worm of self-doubt.

So notice how Jesus responds. He doesn't flat out deny the interpretation being made of him. Rather, he asks them to work through its logic. 'How can Satan cast out Satan?' In other words, if what's happening through me is healing, restoration, hope, then how could that come from an evil source? If good were issuing from evil, then that implies evil is divided in itself. And ultimately, that would mean evil is already defeated. 'If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come' (Mark 3.26). Your accusation makes no sense.

This is very like the argument the Jesus of John's gospel makes against his accusers: 'If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father' (John 10.37-38). It's a brilliant response which casts the onus back on his critics. Rather than him having to prove to their satisfaction that he's not mad or possessed, they are asked to take responsibility for their words. It's if Jesus says, look at what I'm doing – the healing, the liberating, the acts of inclusion. Are you seriously saying that these are works of the devil?

What's powerful about this, and helpful for us, is the reminder that wise discernment of spirits directs our attention to what's happening in the real world. It attends, not to ideologically fixed opinions about who is 'good' and how God will show up, but to where goodness is actually issuing forth. And perhaps this gives a clue to interpreting Jesus' enigmatic pronouncement that 'whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness'. For if you can't or won't recognise the presence of goodness when it's in front of you, that amounts to dishonouring God. And if you persist failing to recognise or honour God (through

your blindness and fixed opinions), then you won't even realise what there is to repent of; you won't recognise your need. You cannot be forgiven.

So, Jesus stands his ground. He withstands the undermining insinuations of madness and demon-possession, the doubts and disbelief of those whose opinion matters most. But his family continue to call. And maybe, in their case, it's not that they don't believe him, but just that they fear to see him on this path, so exposed, so vulnerable to the whims of the crowd and the hostility of the authorities. Can't you just live a quiet life? Come home with us, be safe. But here Mark's imagery is telling. Jesus' family are said to be 'standing outside'; and their location is reiterated when the crowd tells Jesus, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And, in the text, their being 'outside' is contrasted implicitly with the 'inside-ness' of those who are twice said to be 'sitting around him'.

The sense of this, it seems to me, is not that Jesus' family are being *made* to be outside, as if they're deliberately excluded. It's more that they're looking at him *from* the outside of his life's meaning and purpose. They haven't stepped indoors, put themselves inside his skin, inside his world, because they just want to bring him back into *their* world, into the structures and security of the social and religious life they know. Yet if they *were* to let themselves be drawn to where he is, they would perhaps see it all a bit differently. They'd come to recognise how radically his being is sourced in God. And from that place, inside God's life, they too might come to see how all human structures of belonging and security are relativised; and how all human beings are our kin. Which is why Jesus insists that his family of origin does not command his ultimate allegiance and that, in God, his family is potentially everyone: '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. 35).

'This is the time of conversion Ordinary Time is a time for growth and maturation'. In the understanding of our spiritual tradition, growth begins when we stop looking at Jesus from the outside, trying to make sense of him in our existing

categories, judging and assessing him. It begins as we are willing to sit around in his company, to let ourselves be drawn into sharing his relationship with God, so as to discover how we are transformed in the process, becoming bearers of God's life in the ordinary circumstances of ours. And this is the work of prayer, obedience and daily fidelity. It might not be a time of high liturgical excitement. But it's more than enough to be getting on with, don't you think?