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Pentecost 3 (Mark 3: 20-35)

Why so much flack?

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This is not a comfortable reading. Why is Jesus getting so much flack when he's just healing and preaching and feeding people and casting our demons? Some of the people that he calls to be his disciples are tax collectors and he cast out the demon and did much of his healing work on the Sabbath, and he wasn't put off in the least when approached by a leper. Which means that his vision of God's way was rooted in a profound inclusivity that would let neither religious law nor social custom prevent him from reaching those in need with the abundant life he came to offer.¹ As I mentioned in my last reflection, Wayne Teasdale suggests that *'here is our true challenge as mystics in the world: to create community with those who are so different from us that we feel we have nothing in common with them..., the true test of community will be our tolerance for our most profound differences and love for the most challenging among us.'*²

So why do people think Jesus is mad?

All the crowds have gathered around him, enticed, and now he returns home after a busy schedule. He returns home and some religious leaders from the capital come to this backwater to see what's going on. He has their backs up. He is proposing a different way to what they are used to. They sling mud at him, call him names, Beelzebub! Lord of the Flies! That's a pretty bad slur. He does engage with them though, fights back and says "a kingdom that is divided against itself is not going to win, I'm like the one who binds the strong man and then plunders the spoil." This is a pretty strong image, challenging for us, especially as there are so many strong men in our society at the moment who are trying to take control and it seems Jesus presents himself as disarming those strong men.

And then we have his family who are rather concerned that he's gone mad, that his reputation will rub off on them. They want to extricate him, get him out of there so he doesn't do any more damage to their family name.

This bringing two stories bumping up against each other is named by some as a sandwich. This Markan sandwich begins with Jesus family coming to "restrain" him, but the story is interrupted by the "scribes who came down from Jerusalem," and must wait for Jesus to deal with them before it comes to its conclusion. The sandwich structure is important. We can take a lesson from the words on family, and we can take a lesson from the words about Beelzebub, but Mark's intent is to be found in the relationship of the two.³

¹ david lose <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/06/pentecost-2-b-offering-a-wide-welcome/>

² from: *The Artist's Rule, nurturing your creative soul with monastic wisdom*, Christine Valters Paintner

³ <https://www.onemansweb.org/theology/the-year-of-mark-2015/healing-and-the-family-sandwich-mark-3-20-35.html>

René Girard would say that like the scribes and Jesus' family, we use the scapegoat mechanism to excise things we don't agree with and people we don't agree with we call Satan or evil or worse to disempower.

When Jesus asks "How can Satan cast out Satan?" René Girard replies, "It happens all the time." In fact, that's what human culture is founded on. Our anthropology can be summarised by the phrase "Satan casting out Satan."⁴

What he means is that the human family's way of maintaining itself when violence threatens to destroy our cohesion is to find 'a satan' on whom we can pin the blame and then drive them out, or kill them. Then our own social solidarity and stability can be restored. This is how the world works. We cast out the deviants; they become 'a satan' to us.

The problem is that they never are the problem. The scapegoat is always innocent. The Old Testament recognised this in its way; animals used for sacrifice were to be without blemish. Jesus on the cross was innocent; even the Roman Centurion said so. (Luke 23:47) So when we scapegoat we cast out that which we say is 'a satan,' but in fact, we are being the satan who is attacking the innocent to shield ourselves from ourselves.

The truth that Jesus means us to see, then, is in the stated consequences: a house divided against itself cannot stand. The human way of trying to keep a house together will never ultimately work because it always relies on expelling someone, or being over against someone. Jesus comes proclaiming the kingdom, the household, of God which will build a household on the stone the builders rejected. Jesus will let himself be cast out under the satanic accusation and build God's household on forgiveness. Jesus concludes, "And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come." Satan's reign is at an end precisely because his age-old game is that of Satan casting out Satan, resulting in a house divided that cannot stand. (Paul Nuechterlein)⁵

We have the family and we have the Scribes and each of their responses illuminates the other. The family seem to be on the side of the scribes, and what does Jesus say to his family? He redefined family. Family is about those who follow God's way, those who love. That against the scribes and Jesus' family it's a tough message. Which side are we on? Who do we align ourselves with? Are we part of the family, Jesus biological family or his Moral and ethical and chosen Family? I've said this before but it seems to me Jesus' way is about standing up to injustice standing up to values which denigrate others. He's about freedom and release and love but they are tough in reality.

Then we have the bit about the unforgivable sin. Some have suggested that if you think you might've committed the unforgivable sin, then you haven't. If you think you can't be forgiven you are wrong. The unforgivable sin seems to be about calling good evil, misunderstanding the whole thing, turning your back on good and truth and love, and Jesus is always reaching out to love and forgive and to welcome and to challenge us.

So far from damning us is Jesus that he constantly calls us closer, inviting us to sit in his inner circle. This is the mystery of grace. And in part, it terrifies me, because it calls me out of the game of

⁴ <https://www.onemansweb.org/theology/the-year-of-mark-2015/healing-and-the-family-sandwich-mark-3-20-35.html>

⁵ <https://www.onemansweb.org/theology/the-year-of-mark-2015/healing-and-the-family-sandwich-mark-3-20-35.html>

playing community, even contemplative community, into a whole new reality that is life threatening.

By the end of Chapter Three, the glorious and powerful story of Jesus has suddenly become very personal,⁶ says Andrew Prior.

So where does that leave us at Benedictus? One commentator suggests that hospitality is the thing. That is one of the marks of Benedictus. All churches it seems to me think of themselves as hospitable, but are we? It's so much easier to talk to those you know.

And what about the perpetrator of the incident the other day?

I am sitting with a paradox. We say 'all are welcome in this place', and yet if the person who smashed my windscreen and dented the driver-side door frame of my car with a baseball bat while I was in it, turns up on a Saturday night here at Benedictus, we will call the police, knowing he is mentally unwell and possibly drug affected.

How can we call ourselves a welcoming place? What would Jesus do? I really don't know the answers but we as a community are in the middle of this dilemma, the dilemma of making sure the majority of people who come to a service are safe, including those online. Our concerns must go beyond that to our broken mental health system, to our Police. The police assure me he is under the care of mental health, with their stretched resources. The police tell me this is one of 30 incidents connected to this man.

What will it take to turn his world around? What would it take for him to experience some healing and love? How do we live with all this? How do we work it out in the context of today's reading? Maybe Jesus could cast out the Demon, heal his mental health, and addiction, but I can't. Do I need to be involved in more "doing", feeding people like this man, visiting, supporting. Do we need to explore restorative justice? I've sat alongside many homeless people and shared meals with them but, but what? How can we sing 'all are welcome in this place' when some are not welcome. We sit with this discomfort, how do we work it out? Balancing the needs of one with the needs of many? I don't know the answer to these questions but I am sitting with them. Maybe you can join me in that.

What is the call of this contemplative community? What is the cost?

Certainly not scapegoating, not putting everything onto one person to make ourselves feel better. Certainly not opening wide the doors so that people feel vulnerable. There are broken people outside and there are broken people inside. We are one.

Where is the transformation in this situation? Where is the beauty? It is an opportunity to face the brokenness within ourselves, the anger and violence within me, within you, and care for me, for us, and the brokenness and vulnerability and anger and pain of the world. So where now do we as a community of Benedictus sit with all this, what is the invitation? To the paradox? To try and find a way forward? Perhaps, to sink into the marks of Benedictus: hospitality, adventure, silence, discernment, reconciliation, and see where that takes us..

Jesus' invitation, or perhaps my invitation is to sit in the messiness, to meditate, to listen, to discern, and perhaps we will live into an answer?

The call is to to a life which says retaliation, violence, scapegoating are off the table for negotiating the life journey.

⁶ <https://www.onemansweb.org/theology/a-difficult-day-of-the-lord-mark-13-24-37/a-most-uncomfortable-invitation-mark-3-20-35.html>