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Service for the first Sunday after Trinity, 6th June 2021

A warm welcome to all who share in worship with us today.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Let's begin our worship with a prayer...

Let us pray

God of Glory, by raising your Son, you broke the chains of death.

Fill your Church with faith and hope; for a new day has dawned and the way to life stands open, through our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus. In dying, you destroyed our death. In rising, you restored our life.

Lord Jesus, come in glory.

Amen.

HYMN: Breathe on me

If you would like to sing this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.

1 Breathe on me, breath of God.
Fill me with life anew,
that I may love what you so love,
and do what you would do.

3 Breathe on me, breath of God,
my will to yours incline,
till all this selfish part of me
glows with your fire divine.

2 Breathe on me, breath of God,
until my heart is pure,
until with you, I will one will:
to do and to endure.

4 Breathe on me, breath of God,
so shall I never die,
but live with you the perfect life
of your eternity.

Edwin Hatch

PRAYERS

Let us pray

A prayer of confession

Lord Jesus, when our in-crowd is not your crowd,
when our words are harsh and our actions unkind,
when we judge others, rather than join in with others,
when we are set in our ways and not open to change,
forgive us and help us to build community, to the glory of your name.

Amen.

God of truth and mercy, when we break down you build us up,
when we are damaged, you repair us.
If we blaspheme, you bless us.
When we isolate, you include; when we go wrong, you put us right.
When we confess, you forgive; when we make a fresh start, you are with us.
In Jesus' name we thank you.
Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name;
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.
Amen.**

SCRIPTURE READING St Mark 3: 20 - 35

²⁰ Then Jesus went home. Again such a large crowd gathered that Jesus and his disciples had no time to eat. ²¹ When his family heard about it, they set out to take charge of him, because people were saying, "He's gone mad!"

²² Some teachers of the Law who had come from Jerusalem were saying, "He has Beelzebul in him! It is the chief of the demons who gives him the power to drive them out."

²³ So Jesus called them to him and spoke to them in parables: "How can Satan drive out Satan? ²⁴ If a country divides itself into groups which fight each other, that country will fall apart. ²⁵ If a family divides itself into groups which fight each other, that family will fall apart.

²⁶ So if Satan's kingdom divides into groups, it cannot last, but will fall apart and come to an end.

²⁷ "No one can break into a strong man's house and take away his belongings unless he first ties up the strong man; then he can plunder his house.

²⁸ "I assure you that people can be forgiven all their sins and all the evil things they may say.

²⁹ But whoever says evil things against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, because he has committed an eternal sin." (³⁰ Jesus said this because some people were saying, "He has an evil spirit in him.")

³¹ Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. They stood outside the house and sent in a message, asking for him. ³² A crowd was sitting around Jesus, and they said to him, "Look, your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, and they want you."

³³ Jesus answered, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" ³⁴ He looked at the people sitting around him and said, "Look! Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does what God wants is my brother, my sister, my mother."

HYMN: Dear Lord and Father

If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.

1 Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways;
re clothe us in our rightful mind,
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.

2 In simple trust like theirs who heard
beside the Syrian sea
the gracious calling of the Lord,
let us, like them, without a word
rise up and follow thee.

3 O Sabbath rest by Galilee,
O calm of hills above,
where Jesus knelt to share with thee
the silence of eternity,
interpreted by love!

4 Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.

5 Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm!

J G Whittier

SERMON: *Mr Chris Wall*

If you had been following that reading in a bible, depending on which version you were using, you may have noticed that the second part (verses 31-35) was separated from the first part (verses 20-30). The two parts may even have been given separate headings – for example: “Jesus and Beelzebub” for the first part, and “Jesus’ mother and brothers”, for the second. Luckily for us, whoever compiled the Lectionary for today chose, like other versions of the bible, to combine the two into one passage.

That was the right thing to do, because we only have one story here. Indeed, in every version of the bible I have checked, the second part of the reading begins with the words “Then, Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived”, and the word ‘then’ shows us that the second part of the passage is simply a continuation of the first part. So we can be certain that Mark is writing about a particular incident, at a particular time, in a particular place.

Just like the stories we were taught to write when we were at school, this reading has a start, a middle and a conclusion, giving it a perfect balance. Indeed, if we stop reading at verse 30, we miss the very reason why Mark tells the story, which is to explain to the members of the early Church – and to all of us today – the nature of their relationship with Christ.

In response to whomever Jesus’ family sends into the house to tell him they were outside waiting to bring him home – probably one of the twelve disciples – Jesus looks around at his followers and answers: “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does my Father’s will is my brother and my sister and my mother”.

So, I ask you, how does it feel to be looked upon by the Son of God as just as worthy of his love as his own family? They were a caring family. They had made the effort to go out and find him and bring him home. Why? Because, by now, they had become worried about the effect his ministry was having on his mental health – and about the danger it was placing him in from the Jewish religious authorities. So they had come to tell him to ‘pack it all in, for his own sake, and come home’!

It was never Mark’s intention that today’s readers should be interrupted or – even worse – tempted to put their bibles away two-thirds of the way through his story. Indeed, what he is presenting here is a contrast between the responses to Jesus ministry of three different groups of people: his followers, his opponents and his family. How does Mark draw us towards a better understanding of these three groups?

Jesus is well into his ministry here. Popular with the crowds but opposed by the religious authorities, he has progressed from going to the synagogue on the Sabbath to daily teaching out on the road. From the first couple of chapters of Mark, we learn that he has already healed many people but also that he has, as a consequence, clashed with the religious leaders.

The location of this incident isn’t clear, but Mark tells us that Jesus, the twelve disciples and a crowd of followers were in a house together: a house thought to be that of Peter and Andrew in Capernaum, which Jesus used as a base when he was teaching and ministering in that area. The New Revised Standard version of the bible even translates the phrase here as Jesus was “at home”. Certainly, this house was fairly close to his home town, Nazareth, some thirty miles away.

Mark tells us that when his family heard where he was, they went there “to take charge of him”. Another version says “to restrain him”, and it’s reasonable to assume they had walked all the way there, probably through the night, so serious were their concerns for his well-being; unlike today, of course, when they would probably have used social-media such as *Facebook* or *WhatsApp*!

Before they get there, a serious argument breaks out between Jesus and a delegation of visiting Teachers of the Law or ‘scribes’ as they were known. They were from Jerusalem to carry out an investigation into what he was doing there, and were determined to discredit him. They obviously knew where to find him, as did his family.

These scribes began by claiming that Jesus was, “possessed by an evil spirit” and that “his ministry of driving out demons was the work of Satan himself”. The word Mark uses for Satan is ‘Beelzebub’, which is the Greek translation of a Hebrew word, meaning ‘Prince of Demons’. Jesus, of course, dismisses these claims as nonsense.

At the start of the passage, Mark has told us that when Jesus’ family decided to set off to Capernaum to bring him home for his own safety, it was because some people had started saying that he was “out of his mind”.

While preparing for today, I thought back to the time when I became a Christian, and I wondered whether my mother and the rest of our family and friends ever thought I, or my

wife, were a 'bit mad', because of some of the words and expressions we might have begun to use.

You'll remember I'm sure, Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin – the supreme Jewish Council – that is those who controlled the making and keeping of Israel's religious Law, who asked Jesus how anyone could be 'born again'. In John ch 3 v 4 he asks: "How can anyone be born again, having grown old? Surely he can't enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" So, if Nicodemus couldn't understand what Jesus was talking about, what chance was there of my mother and my sister understanding some of the phraseology I was probably using?

This is likely to be a common experience. I'm sure some of you will have heard stories about parents trying to dissuade their sons or daughters from fervent religious beliefs, assuming they'd been 'brainwashed'. Seen in this light, the passage has a familiar, present-day ring to it, with the opinion of some of the people – that Jesus was "out of his mind" – being far less malicious than the claim of the scribes that he was "demon-possessed".

Let's look at the facts. When only 30, Jesus suddenly left his flourishing family business in Nazareth, where he would have been making a living for himself and for his family; giving it all up to become an itinerant preacher, on a collision course with the Jewish leaders of the day, where he might be expected to come off second-best. Were these the actions of a rational person? I'm sure that Alberta King had a few reservations when her son, Martin Luther King, took on the might of the US Government in the late 1950s and '60s. His wife Coretta, even though she was an activist herself, might well have wondered how she would cope if anything happened to her husband, leaving her with four children to look after as well as holding down two jobs.

But Mark presents the opinions of both the scribes and Jesus' family as inappropriate responses to Jesus' ministry. The charge against him by the scribes, was that he was a 'sorcerer', performing exorcisms through an evil power. They didn't deny the genuineness of these miracles, but claimed he was performing them with the power of Satan. Jesus responds with two very short parables demonstrating that it was absurd to think that Satan would give him the power to destroy his own kingdom. "After all", Jesus says, "if Satan opposes himself and is divided, then his kingdom will fall and his end will come". It's at this point that Jesus explains the seriousness of the accusations of these Teachers of the Law.

The phrase 'the unforgivable sin' has fascinated Christians for centuries; but in this passage, we hear what Jesus meant by it as he warns his listeners that all sins and blasphemies except one can be forgiven – that one being "blasphemy of the Holy Spirit", which is discrediting God by asserting that the spiritual gifts Jesus used in his ministry were from the devil.

From the point of view of a Teacher of the Law, we – as Christians – need to appreciate that Judaism already considered the forgiveness of sins by a mere man to be 'blasphemy'. In Mark ch 2 v 7, another group of Teachers of the Law protested: "Why does this man talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" So Jewish lawyers had already condemned Jesus as a 'blasphemer'; but here they are, having to listen to him

accusing them of being the worst kind of blasphemers. In verse 29, Jesus says: “But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; that person is guilty of an eternal sin”.

One scholar who has studied this passage thinks that the reason Jesus considered ‘blasphemy of the Holy Spirit’ to be unforgivable was that if a person (or persons) was insistent that the power behind Christ’s miracles came from Satan, then they wouldn’t have any concern if they didn’t receive God’s forgiveness for their sins: it just wouldn’t bother them. So if they got themselves into such a mind-set, refusing to listen to the Holy Spirit and unable to see anything lovely in Jesus, then they would have no concept of sin. If they have no sense of sin, they will be incapable of repentance, and therefore can’t be forgiven. If they continue to refuse forgiveness, then entry into the Kingdom of Heaven becomes impossible.

If that interpretation is true, then the ‘unforgivable sin’, far from being a single act, is a condition of body, mind and soul. The seriousness of this argument Jesus has with the Teachers of the Law completely justifies his family’s concern for his health and safety, and their timely intervention into the proceedings. Whether they expected the reaction to their concerns that Jesus gave them, Mark doesn’t say; although it’s pretty clear that this was never going to be your average ‘*We were in the area, so we thought we’d pop in for a cup of tea*’ type of visit.

There’s evidence in other parts of the gospels that Jesus didn’t enjoy the full support of his own family during his ministry, even though some of them later moved on from a position of misunderstanding to one of faith and commitment to the cause. But it’s in this tension between Jesus and his family that he delivers what would surely be a ‘bombshell’ to any parent. “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asks, and turning to look at those sat down around him, he follows this with “Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother”. Notice how subtly he adds the words ‘and sister’ here!

What did Jesus mean when he said this? Well, I suggest he was saying that, from time to time, being one of Jesus’ disciples may bring us into conflict with members of our own family. Should that happen, we would have to be brave enough, for the sake of an individual – of our community or of the world at large – to face up to our responsibilities to Christ. Now, that doesn’t mean hurting our family or casting them aside; because we will surely be there for them when they need us and, in time, they will come to understand that.

But Jesus did cast three things aside, to which we all can become strongly attached. He cast aside his

- financial security
- personal safety, and
- popularity.

That’s why some of the people were saying he was “out of his mind” and that’s why his family turned up on Peter’s doorstep.

We can all appreciate that, can't we? That it's possible to form a relationship with another person which goes deeper than that we have with our parents and siblings. Marriage is one example - and there are quite a few more. It may even be a relationship with more than one person: twelve perhaps...? Jesus and his disciples, who also gave up their financial security and personal safety, would be together for three years: long enough to be welded into a band of 'brothers' with the common purpose of seeking to know Christ and, later as apostles, of bringing others into his Kingdom. In Luke's book of the Acts of the Apostles, we have an inspirational record of many of their achievements, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

PRAYERS of intercession

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, as one family, we are here to worship you and to pray with you. We are mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers. We are sons and daughters, aunts and uncles, nannies and granddads. We are cousins, neighbours, friends and colleagues. We are your family and your church.

Loving God, we praise you for calling us into your family, for choosing us even though we make mistakes. For not giving up on us, even when we feel like giving up on ourselves. For offering us so much more, when we could settle for less.

Lord, we thank you for drawing us into a deeper relationship with you and with one another. Never let us forget, Father, that we are part of your family. Bind all that gets in the way, as we strive to bring others into that same family relationship with you – both those overburdened with wealth and belongings, as well as those who are deprived of even the basic needs.

Eternal God, you hear our prayers and you know those people for whom we are praying, so we commit them, and ourselves, into your loving hands.

Amen.

HYMN: All my hope

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

1 All my hope on God is founded;
he doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth,
only good and only true.
God unknown,
he alone
calls my heart to be his own.

2 Human pride and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray his trust;
what with care and toil he buildeth,
tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power,
hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.

3 God's great goodness aye endureth,
deep his wisdom, passing thought:
splendour, light, and life attend him,
beauty springeth out of naught.
Evermore
from his store
new-born worlds rise and adore.

4 Daily doth th' Almighty giver
bounteous gifts on us bestow;
his desire our soul delighteth,
pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand
at his hand;
joy doth wait on his command.

5 Still from earth to God eternal
sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising
for the gift of Christ his Son.
Christ doth call
one and all:
ye who follow shall not fall.

Robert Bridges

BLESSING

May the Father's love surround us, the Son's grace sustain us, and the Spirit's power transform us.

And the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with us and remain with us always.

Amen.