**Sermon for SJB and SSC June 6TH 2021**

**Mark 3 vv20-35**

This is a difficult gospel reading to get into and no mistake! Our western world view and our 21st century language are so different from that of first century Palestine. We don’t talk much about Satan and demons today. The mental pictures they might conjure up seem very mediaeval. We no longer ascribe every kind of mental distress to demonic possession. However, every diocese still has an exorcist, discreet and well trained, ready to work in cooperation with the medical professionals when called upon.

The cosmic battle between good and evil has been raging since the world began. The battle of love versus hatred, greed versus generosity, kindness versus cruelty, sickness versus health, captivity versus freedom, truth versus falsehood, and no doubt you can go on adding to the list. Good and evil are always in conflict, whatever language we use to describe them. Sometimes we’re more aware of it, sometimes less, but it’s always there.

Jesus comes to wage war on evil for the sake of the whole world. His weapons are the power of the Holy Spirit to heal and restore and the power of obedient, self giving sacrificial love. Evil cannot ultimately stand against these weapons. Everything evil was flung against Jesus, but even death couldn’t hold him down. We acknowledge that his life ,death and resurrection have conquered sin and death, so why, 2000 years later, are we still apparently in the throes of this seemingly never ending battle?

Something I read about the Normandy landings in world war two helped me to get my head around this a bit better. After DDay the final outcome of world war two was no longer in doubt, **but** there was still a fierce battle to be fought before peace could finally be declared. [[1]](#endnote-1)The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus show us clearly that the final outcome of the war between good and evil is no longer in doubt, **but** there is clearly still battle to be done until the end comes. We have no idea when that will be or why in human terms it seems to be taking so long, but it’s not only the scriptures that tell us that the end WILL finally come. Science tells us that too. It’s inevitable, but the how and the when are of course not known to us. Jesus himself says no-one knows the day or the hour and we are not to speculate. We are living in the between times- -the now and the not yet of the kingdom rule of God.

For now it’s our job to love and care for one another and our planet earth , to follow Jesus to the best of our ability and to share the good news of god’s love. Jesus has shown us the way and given us all we need for strength in the continuing battle. To his first followers he said, follow me and go and share the good news of God’s saving love far and wide. He says the same to us.

We’re only into chapter three here in this year’s lectionary readings from the whirlwind gospel of Mark, but so much has happened already. Jesus has left home, been baptised by John in the River Jordan and anointed by the Holy spirit to begin his ministry. Straight after that he’s spent forty days in the desert in preparation, fasting, praying and wrestling with temptation, and now it’s all taken off in the most spectacular way. The healings and exorcisms he’s performed have drawn huge crowds. He’s pronounced the forgiveness of sins on a paralysed man and as proof of his authority to do this he’s healed the man in front of his challengers. He’s chosen a motley band of twelve to move around with him. He’s challenged the traditional rigid rules of the religious authorities stirring up trouble for himself. Now the huge crowds have become so demanding that he and his followers haven’t even the time and the space to eat.

Phew!

His family are shocked to the core. This is no way for a properly brought up, self respecting Jew to behave. They fear for his sanity and also very likely for their own family reputation, so they’ve come to try to take him back home out of harm’s way. Another more sinister group have also come to spy on him, representatives of the Jewish religious powers that be, known as the scribes. Yes, they do have authority over their people but only as much as the occupying forces of Rome will allow them. It’s always a delicate political balance. People have been comparing them unfavourably with Jesus saying **he** teaches as one with authority and not as the scribes. The balance of power with their Roman overlords is always dependent on public subservience. Jesus is already clearly a threat to that balance and so they’re already plotting possible ways to destroy him, without causing a riot. It will take them some while but by Passover week in three years time, they will mistakenly think they’ve won.

For now they’re insulting him, trying to turn people against him, saying his power is satanic, he’s demon possessed, in league with the devil. He debates with them, using both logic and parables. He refuses to go home with his family, saying he’s now part of a new, much wider family, as indeed **we** are now. I love that we’re part of the world wide family of Christ’s church. No-one should feel they have no family even if they have no blood relations. God is our parent and we’re all related, we all have a place in this family and we need to make sure we include and value every member. Our offertory hymn picks up this theme beautifully.

Finally though,we come to the **really** difficult verses in this reading: *Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven 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”.*

So much has been written and said and fretted over about this enigmatic, controversial, and haunting statement. Many People much holier and cleverer than I am have wrestled with it. Some have tortured themselves worrying about whether they’ve actually committed the sin and will be eternally condemned. If Jesus, even while hanging in agony on the cross, can ask for forgiveness for his torturers, in those incredible, wonderful words, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do”---how can he also say that there is any unforgivable sin? Perhaps the key is in the last few words: - -*For they had said, “ he has an unclean spirit”.* These scribes, learned in the scriptures and in the ways of God, seeing the wonderful healing and deliverance miracles being performed by Jesus, have been so consumed with jealous rage that they’ve completely hardened their hearts, closed their minds and pronounced what is clearly pure goodness, the Holy Spirit of God, to be pure evil. They are therefore making it impossible for themselves to receive forgiveness, because they have rejected the Spirit of God outright

We read elsewhere in the gospels another warning of Jesus, that those who don’t forgive others can’t be forgiven themselves. This again is not because God **wants to withhold forgiveness** but that by not forgiving others we actually block ourselves off from receiving his forgiveness. It isn’t always easy to forgive. It can be a long hard process. Believe me, I know- -I’ve been in the thick of that particular battle! B**ut really** engaging with that process, wrestling with it in prayer and seeking outside help if you’re finding it difficult, does eventually leads to freedom and release.

Today’s is a tough gospel reading to be sure. I would have avoided it I could but because we have the discipline of the lectionary, the readings set over three years for the whole church, we can’t duck out of the hard bits and that’s good for us! Now that the sermons come to you via email or via the website and the readings are there too, you can chew them over at your leisure. If you have questions or comments about what we preach, then please do email or ring or grab us after church, or discuss with others. It’s a learning process for all of us as we journey on in the faith together. And be encouraged. Although the long final battle between good and evil still rages, the victory and eternal peace and joy to come are never in doubt. Amen.

Carole Lewis

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)