



GOSPEL GOSSIP

Jesus said, 'A kingdom divided against itself cannot stand.'

St Mark 3. 20-35

Sunday 9 June 2024

We go back to 'Ordinary Time' after Lent and Eastertide' with firm statements from Jesus recorded in St Mark's gospel. Looking at just two of them this week, we see how Jesus challenges the accusation that he is league with the devil, which is how he can perform exorcisms. His teaching was so extraordinary that people thought he was out of his mind. However, Jesus refuted the accusation by challenging his accusers to explain how the devil could work against himself, as a kingdom, or a house, divided against itself cannot stand.

Using an analogy from practical experience, Jesus talks of spiritual matters. By saying that a kingdom – or a household – cannot remain firm unless united, Jesus is also talking of the necessity of unity amongst those who were seeking God. 'Seekers of God' is an interpretation of 'Israel' which was the name given by to Jacob after wrestling with an angel, and whose roots lie in the meaning of contending with God. Jesus was therefore not just speaking in general terms, but in quite specific ones to his Jewish listeners. Judaism was divided in to main parties the Sadducees and the Pharisees, with a whole range of religious views within them. Pointing out the 'structural' weakness of Judaism, Jesus puts down a marker that God's kingdom cannot be divided.

- What was the point of Jesus' teaching in saying that a divided kingdom/house cannot stand?
- What are the 'structural' weaknesses amongst today's 'seekers of God'?
- How does division begin?
- How can these fault-lines be repaired – not just papered over?
- Can God's kingdom be divided – how may it be under threat?

Another controversial and challenging statement in this passage is that Jesus appears to deny his human family, stating that whoever does the will of God was his kin. When St Mark talks of his brothers and sisters, he is not intending us to think Jesus had siblings (even half- ones) but uses 'brothers and sisters' to mean those who were dear to him. From across the Pond, we are familiar with the expression 'bro' – brother – meaning someone with whom we would wish to associate. We also use 'brothers' and 'sisters' ourselves and don't mean physical siblings.

This would seem harsh of Jesus. Being told that his loved ones were outside waiting for him, he asks the rhetorical question, 'Who are my mother and brothers', answering it himself: 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.' He is not denying human relationships, but challenging people to relate to God through him. This ties in with the opening verses we have looked at above. It lays bare a conflict that many people have today: balancing love of family with love of God. The gauntlet laid by Jesus is that we should love God first, and all other relationships flow from this – remember the First and Second Commandments, affirmed by Jesus' own teaching?

- Do you experience tension between your faith and your family?
- Is it right to put family before God?
- How can those who do the will of God be Jesus' family?
- Was Jesus being harsh to those 'family' waiting outside?
- How would have they – or we – reacted, initially and after reflection?

As we settle back into 'Ordinary Time', the 'Green Season' after Trinity Sunday, we are challenged right from the off. How do you respond – fight or flight?