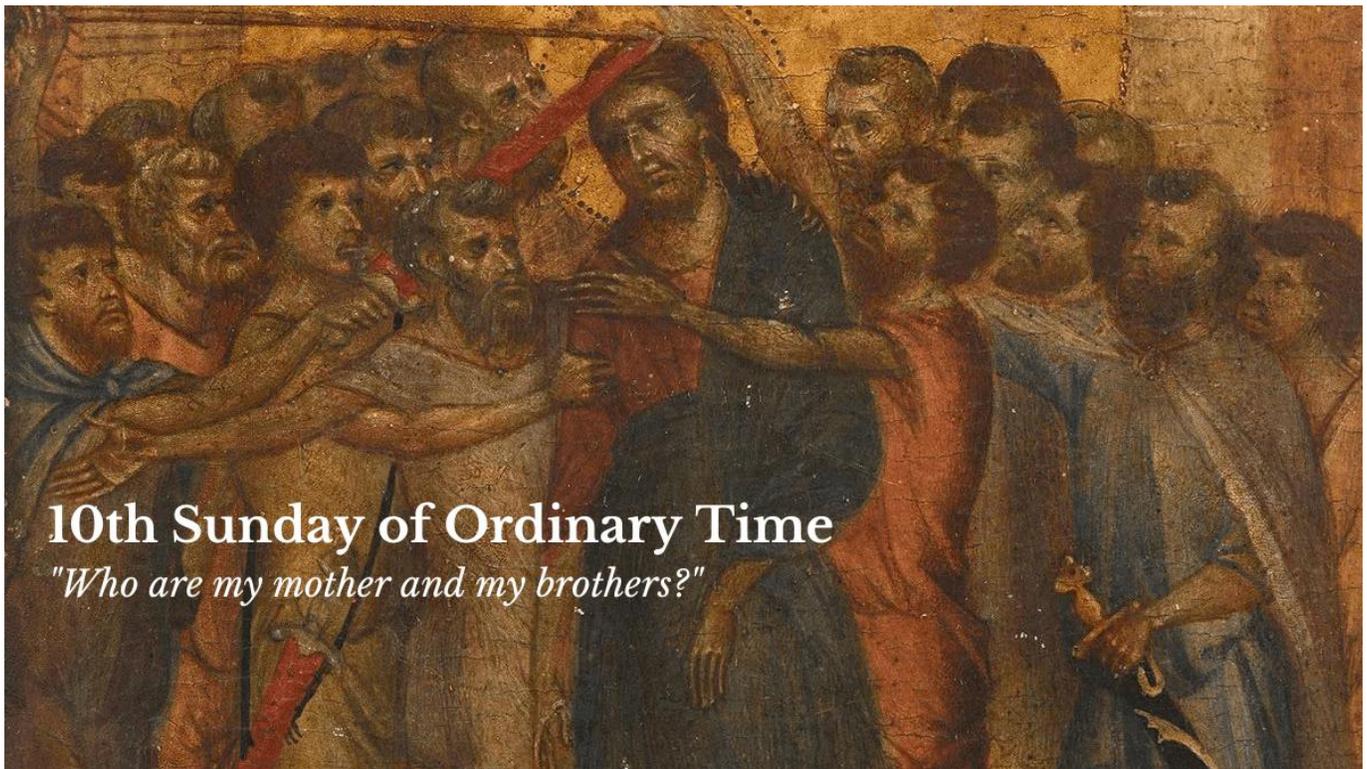


10th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B

²⁰ He came home. Again (the) crowd gathered, making it impossible for them even to eat.²¹ When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.”²² The scribes who had come from Jerusalem said, “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” and “By the prince of demons he drives out demons.”²³ Summoning them, he began to speak to them in parables, “How can Satan drive out Satan?²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand; that is the end of him.²⁷ But no one can enter a strong man’s house to plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can plunder his house.²⁸ Amen, I say to you, all sins and all blasphemies that people utter will be forgiven them.²⁹ But whoever blasphemes against the holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an everlasting sin.”³⁰ For they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”³¹ His mother and his brothers arrived. Standing outside they sent word to him and called him.³² A crowd seated around him told him, “Your mother and your brothers (and your sisters) are outside asking for you.”³³ But he said to them in reply, “Who are my mother and (my) brothers?”³⁴ And looking around at those seated in the circle he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers.³⁵ (For) whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:20–35)



"Mocking of Christ" by Ciambue | 1280 | Louvre, Paris | PD-US

The Mystery of Jesus

The translation used for all liturgies in Catholic Churches here in the United States, is “The New American Bible.” As help to readers, the editors add some headings to give the reader a macro-sense of the text. Our gospel passage falls in a section labeled, “The Mystery of Jesus.” Possibly because the cast of characters that are somewhat mystified by Jesus include the crowds, his family, and Scribes. But the story of Jesus, the mystery of the Incarnation, is still unfolding. The Gospel of Mark has only begun.

After his baptism by John and the temptation in the wilderness, Jesus begins his public ministry: “*Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: ‘This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.’*” (Mark 1:14-15). Jesus calls disciples, heals Peter’s mother-in-law, casts out demons, heals lepers and a paralytic, sends the disciples out on a healing mission, and begins to encounter challenges and “push back” from the Jerusalem authorities represented by the Scribes. And, this brings us to the passage that comprises our Sunday gospel reading.

As Jesus came down from the mountain with his twelve companions, “*Again (the) crowd gathered, making it impossible for them even to eat.*” The word had spread throughout the region of this Galilean miracle worker and teacher. So not for the first time, Jesus and the disciples are inundated with people wanting a healing, to know if the rumors and stories are true, and with their own worries and hopes. Jesus also attracted the attention of the Jerusalem authorities who wonder if this is something real or just another “wanna’ be” who will lead them to ruin. As the people assemble, Mark informs us of a variety of reactions:

- His relatives have concerns about/for Jesus (*more on this later*)
- Apparently the Scribes have already heard/seen enough and are sure he is possessed (*and more on this later*), and
- We are left to wonder what the disciples think of all this.

A Literary Note

It is not without purpose that the story dealing with Jesus’ relatives (Mark 3:20 *ff.* and 31–35) is interrupted by the account of the Beelzebul controversy (Ch. 3:22–30). The insertion of the incident involving the scribes from Jerusalem between the earlier and later phases of the family narrative is likely deliberate and serves to raise the stakes and the tension for the scene as a whole. The packaging of these two encounters suggests that Jesus’ relatives who declare “*He is out of his mind*” (v.21) are not unlike the scribes who attribute his extraordinary powers to collusion with Beelzebul, the prince of the demons (*He is possessed by Beelzebul*, v.22). What the accusations have in common is that the underlying intent is to prevent Jesus from continuing his mission of proclaiming the Good News - regardless of the underlying intent of their intervention. It also sets the stage for what it will mean to truly be “family” with Jesus.

Also the pericope has been arranged in a chiasmatic structure in which we encounter the characters:

Crowd
Family
Scribes
The parables of Satan’s end (vv.23-27)
Scribes
Family
Crowd

Seizing Jesus

When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.” This is the only place in the gospels that provides this pericope. It is not clear whether Jesus’s family is involved at all. The Greek phrase, *hoi par’ autou*, is not very specific. The literal meaning is “those who are close to him, alongside him, beside him.” Certainly the text of v.32 referring to “*mothers and brothers*” would naturally lead one to the inference that v.21 should be translated as “family”, but many English translations follow the 1611 King James Version and translate this expression as “his friends” instead.

In addition, the verb translated as to seize him (*kratesai*) covers both welcome and unwelcome touching, whether for healing (as at verse 1:31), or to make an arrest (as in Gethsemane, 14:46).

The verb translated as he is out of his mind (*exeste*) similarly applies equally well to a variety of mental states, from the positive astonishment at Jesus's teaching and miracles (for example, verse 2:12) to something negative that contrasts with sobriety or calm demeanor (2 Corinthians 5:13). The term can describe one who is driven and seemingly obsessed with a task or mission. Seeing Jesus' eschatological sense of mission, his urgent drive to minister, his failure properly to eat and sleep undoubtedly led the family/friends to their conviction to take charge of Jesus for his own good. But it reveals both misunderstanding and unbelief. The entire incident calls to mind passages in which the man of God is despised by family and contemporaries who mistake his zeal for God as "madness."

It is unnecessary to suppose that Mary also suspected that Jesus had lost his grasp upon reality. A maternal compassion and worry for her son seems the better understanding. What the "brothers" thought is a different matter. In any case, they seemed determined to restrain Jesus and bring him home.

Accusing Jesus

What the Scribes, representing the Jerusalem authorities, think is clear: "*He is possessed by Beelzebul,*" and "*By the prince of demons he drives out demons.*" (v.22) The earlier conviction that he is "*out of his mind*" finds a more serious charge in v.22 that is repeated in v.30: "*He has an unclean spirit.*" William Lane (*The Gospel of Mark*) offers: "The arrival of a delegation of legal specialists from Jerusalem suggests that the Galilean mission of Jesus had attracted the critical attention of the Sanhedrin. The scribes know that Jesus has a considerable following and that he possesses the power to expel demons. It is possible that they were official emissaries from the Great Sanhedrin who came to examine Jesus' miracles and to determine whether Capernaum should be declared a 'seduced city,' the prey of an apostate preacher. Such a declaration required a thorough investigation made on the spot by official envoys in order to determine the extent of the defection and to distinguish between the instigators, the apostates and the innocent."

The Scribes levied two charges: (1) Jesus is possessed by a demon [v.22,30] and (2) he is in league with the "*prince of demons.*" Each quite serious charges and not just as a means to discredit Jesus, but as a means to formally charge him with blasphemy.

Lane notes that the word/name "Beelzebul" occurs in no Jewish writing, which leads scholars to wonder if the name is a passing colloquialism for a local Galilean demon-prince or more broadly Satan (which modern readers equate with "the devil".) Alone or together, their accusations categorize Jesus' work as unlawful, and classify him as a sorcerer or magician, a charge of growing concern in first century Jewish writing. But however wrong-headed, their pronouncement, that Jesus is a satanic agent and not a divine one, recognizes power at work in him.

Jesus' Response

²³ *Summoning them, he began to speak to them in parables, "How can Satan drive out Satan?²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand; that is the end of him.²⁷ But no one can enter a strong man's house to plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can plunder his house.*

Jesus first addresses the second charge: he is in league with the "*prince of demons.*" His approach is to incorporate parables to construct a cumulative argument that shows in high relief the incongruity and fallacy of the scribal charges. Whatever one is to have understood by "Beelzebul," Jesus makes clear what

is at stake in their assessment is a confrontation between the power of God and the power of Satan. In this way Jesus brings the controversy into the context of his mission as a direct confrontation with Satan - a confrontation already begun in Mark's recording of the wilderness confrontation. Immediately following the wilderness scene, Jesus clearly announces his mission: "*This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand.*" (Mark 1:15)

Lane succinctly explains Jesus' refutation of the second charge: "Satan is not able to cast out Satan... His argument is cumulative in its force: If what you say is true there exists the impossible circumstance that Satan is destroying his own realm. For it is self-evident that a kingdom divided against itself will fall, while a household divided against itself cannot be established. If your accusation is factual, then Satan has become divided in his allegiance. This should mean that he has become powerless. Yet this is clearly not so. Satan remains strong, and this fact exposes the fallacy of your charge."

Jesus then addresses the first charge, Jesus is possessed by a demon, by a single verse: "*But no one can enter a strong man's house to plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can plunder his house.*" Although not specifically named, Jesus' reference to the "strong man" is clearly Satan, whose power is evident in the world. The power of Satan is clearly seen in the corruption of man and the world: sin, possession by evil spirits, disease and death. The workers in this sphere of death are the demons. Clearly the demons are not stronger than their master, so it is only one stronger than Satan that can enter his "house," the earthly realm, tie him up and plunder the goods.

In the Markan narrative so far, we have seen demons cast out, sins forgiven, and diseases cured. In just the casting out of demons, Jesus has shown that he has the power to constrain and limit the power of Satan in his own realm and to release those "captive" to Satan's power. It is especially this act of casting out demons that is at the heart of Jesus' proclaimed mission and the evidence of being the agent of irresistible power. One has to decide on the source of that irresistible power.

Deciding for Jesus

Without waiting for a response from the Scribes, Jesus takes the argument to its logical next step. Having argued that the source of his irresistible power is not of Satan, one should only be able conclude that the source is from God - and this brings the scribes and others to a pivot point: it is time to decide and declare from whence comes the power Jesus is using in the world. Jesus simply tells them the consequences for choosing wrongly: ²⁸ *Amen, I say to you, all sins and all blasphemies that people utter will be forgiven them.*²⁹ *But whoever blasphemes against the holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an everlasting sin.*³⁰ *For they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."*

Lane points out an interesting aspect of the use of the word "Amen." He notes:

"Verse 28 provides the first instance of the recurring formula of introduction, 'Amen, I say unto you ...', which in the NT is strictly limited to the sayings of Jesus. His use of 'Amen' to introduce and endorse his own words is without analogy in the whole of Jewish literature and in the remainder of the NT. According to idiomatic Jewish usage 'Amen' was regularly used to affirm, approve, or appropriate the words of another person, even in those few instances where it occurs at the head of a phrase (1 Kings 1:36; Jer. 11:5; 28:6; M. Soṭah II. 5). Jesus' practice of prefacing his words with an 'Amen' to strengthen the solemn affirmation which follows introduced a completely new manner of speaking. 'Amen' denotes that his words are reliable and true because he is totally committed to do and speak the will of God. As such, the Amen-formulation is not

only a highly significant characteristic of Jesus' speech, but a Christological affirmation: Jesus is the true witness of God."

What follows this "Amen" is a verse that is fraught with uncertainty about the nature of the "unforgivable sin" - blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. One only needs to query the internet to see that there are over 1.5 million instances of efforts to explain what Jesus meant. Underlying the search is a person's desire to know if they have committed the one sin for which there is no possibility of forgiveness. William Lane offers what I found to be the most thoughtful and complete discussion of these three verses:

Jesus affirms that all the sins of men are open to forgiveness, with one fearful exception. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit forever removes a man beyond the sphere where forgiveness is possible. This solemn warning must be interpreted in the light of the specific situation in which it was uttered. Blasphemy is an expression of defiant hostility toward God. The scribes were thoroughly familiar with this concept under the rubric "the profanation of the Name," which generally denoted speech which defies God's power and majesty. The scribal tradition considered blasphemy no less seriously than did Jesus. "The Holy One, blessed be he, pardons everything else, but on profanation of the Name [i.e. blasphemy] he takes vengeance immediately." This is the danger to which the scribes exposed themselves when they attributed to the agency of Satan the redemption brought by Jesus. The expulsion of demons was a sign of the intrusion of the Kingdom of God. Yet the scribal accusations against Jesus amount to a denial of the power and greatness of the Spirit of God. By assigning the action of God to a demonic origin the scribes betray a perversion of spirit which, in defiance of the truth, chooses to call light darkness. In this historical context, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit denotes the conscious and deliberate rejection of the saving power and grace of God released through Jesus' word and act. Jesus' action in releasing men from demonic possession was a revelation of the Kingdom of God which called for decision. Yet his true dignity remained veiled, and the failure of the scribes to recognize him as the Bearer of the Spirit and the Conqueror of Satan could be forgiven. The considered judgment that his power was demonic, however, betrayed a defiant resistance to the Holy Spirit. This severe warning was not addressed to laymen but to carefully trained legal specialists whose task was to interpret the biblical Law to the people. It was their responsibility to be aware of God's redemptive action. Their insensitivity to the Spirit through whom Jesus was qualified for his mission exposed them to grave peril. Their own tradition condemned their gross callousness as sharply as Jesus' word. The admonition concerning blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is not to be divorced from this historical context and applied generally. Mark emphasizes this by terminating the incident with a reference to the specific accusation that Jesus was possessed by an unclean spirit. The use of the imperfect tense of the verb in the explanatory note, "because they were saying that he is possessed," implies repetition and a fixed attitude of mind, the tokens of callousness which brought the scribes to the brink of unforgivable blasphemy.

In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, as part of the words of absolution, the priest says: "God, the Father of Mercy, through the death and resurrection of his Son, has poured the Holy Spirit into the world for the forgiveness of sin..." It seems to me that the Scribes, willfully blind, have refused the only way of forgiveness that God has provided. So, how can there be forgiveness? The blasphemy is to hold that the Spirit (and thus the Power of God in the world) cannot forgive sin. The Catechism of the Catholic Church offers a succinct view on this passage:

“Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.” There are no limits to the mercy of God, but anyone who deliberately refuses to accept his mercy by repenting, rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit. Such hardness of heart can lead to final impenitence and eternal loss (CCC 1864).

The Family of Jesus

²⁰ *He came home. Again (the) crowd gathered, making it impossible for them even to eat.*²¹ *When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.”*³¹ *His mother and his brothers arrived. Standing outside they sent word to him and called him.*³² *A crowd seated around him told him, “Your mother and your brothers (and your sisters) are outside asking for you.”*³³ *But he said to them in reply, “Who are my mother and (my) brothers?”*³⁴ *And looking around at those seated in the circle he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers.”*³⁵ *(For) whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”*

You should notice that I have appended verses from the start of the gospel reading as though it was a continuous narrative. The setting of vv.20-21 is likely Nazareth where Mary resided. Upon hearing the accounts about what her son Jesus was experiencing, like any caring mother, she sets out to be with her son. The arrival in Capernaum is captured in v.31. Meanwhile, with his family “outside” (re: v.32), Mary and the others are unable to enter the house and so they call to Jesus from outside. We don’t know if Jesus was aware of why they were calling to him. It is likely that those around Jesus felt compelled to let him know his family was calling to him, after all the Law of God demanded the honoring of mother and father.

We do know that Jesus had already been calling people out of their natural family setting and relationships to be of service to the announced Kingdom of God and enter into “the family of God.” Witness the calling of Simon, Andrew, James and John in Mark 1, followed by the calling of Levi (Matthew) in Mark 2. And so Jesus seized upon the interruption as an occasion for teaching.

The rhetorical question, “*Who are my mother and my brothers?*” focuses attention on the deeper issue involved in an authentic relationship to him. Looking around the room and the disciples gathered there, Jesus simply announced “*Here are my mother and my brothers.*” Was it more than the 12 who were appointed apostles in Mark 3:13-19? Perhaps. What is clear is that in these 12 is their openness to bind themselves to Jesus whom God has sent. It was a relationship rooted not in the earthly physicality of family, but in the Spirit.

“*(For) whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*” Obedience to Jesus and commitment to the mission of the Kingdom is the new determinate of “family” or in the biblical terminology: kinship. This is especially true because of the demands of the Kingdom of God which has drawn near in his person. Because the Kingdom is breaking in upon men there is a new urgency in the demand for obedience.

As Matt Skinner, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary notes: “In short, Jesus redraws the lines of family and belonging, saying that those who do God’s will are siblings and mother to him. In that culture, in which responsibility, identity, stability, and opportunity were so bound up with kinship structures, Jesus’ pronouncement of a new family might elicit gasps. But it also can bring great joy to some, especially those followers who find themselves estranged from their own families of origin.”

Skinner offers a wonderful summary of this gospel pericope:

In Mark 3, people have started to conspire against Jesus (3:6). For his part, Jesus has organized his associates and granted them authority to contribute to his efforts (3:13-19). Now, in this passage, he declares the imminent end of a satanic reign, mocks the big-league scribes and describes them as utterly resistant to God, and tells his nervous family that he does not belong to them but to his collaborators. Religious authorities and his own relatives lack imagination; based on how they view things, “demonic” and “insane” are categories that promise protection. Those labels represent last-gasp attempts to hold onto faulty worldviews. Yet the labels do not stick.

Scribes and relatives cannot figure him out, and so they attempt to quarantine him. He seems rather willing to write them off for the sake of achieving something great.

Only three chapters into the narrative, and a lot of people are understandably worried. In many ways, we still should be.

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