

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 6th June 2021
The First Sunday after Trinity

Collect

God of truth,
help us to keep your law of love
and to walk in ways of wisdom,
that we may find true life
in Jesus Christ your Son.
Amen.

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture—‘I believed, and so I spoke’—we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

Mark 3:20-end

The crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’ And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’ And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, ‘How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

‘Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for 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.’

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’

Sermon

Probably the two most watched television channels in my house are ITV3 and the Drama channel. I can almost always find a detective drama from the 1980s or 1990s. What I appreciate about those series is the way that by the end of the programme, almost without fail, the culprit will have been caught and locked up, and everyone else can return to their normal lives in safety. Whether it's Inspector Morse, Miss Marple, Inspector Lynley, or one of the countless others, the stories are for the most part painted in bold colours, so that black is black and white is white. By the end, we know where we stand, and we know that those who engage in wrongdoing will pay a heavy penalty, leaving those who do not to live in freedom.

What I've noticed more recently is that drama just isn't like that. Often it is impossible to know who is honest and who is not; the tension can be maintained not just for a few episodes, but from one series to the next; and sometimes we are left with the discomfort of realising that the characters are neither all good nor all bad. I didn't watch *Line of Duty*, but by all accounts that's perhaps the prime example of the new genre of detective dramas exploring this complex reality. It can make for uncomfortable viewing.

In some ways this morning's gospel makes for uncomfortable reading. We are in the third chapter of Mark's gospel, reasonably early in Jesus's ministry, and yet the controversy has already begun. Jesus has started to preach, teach and heal people. On the one hand crowds are gathering around him, wanting to listen to what he has to say, yet on the other the scribes have started to become restless, and even his own family are questioning whether what he is saying and doing comes from God or the devil. While we, reading this two thousand years later know who is on the side of truth, at the time it clearly wasn't so obvious, even to those you would expect to have supported Jesus.

With Mark's gospel it can help us to look at the structure of a passage in order to fully understand its meaning. One of the literary techniques that the writer of Mark's gospel used was the chiasmic structure, which frames one episode with another. This is also called intercalation, or more informally the Markan sandwich. It is that last name that actually helps, because it describes how the structure works. The main filling of the sandwich – which is the most important aspect of the story – is framed with bread and butter.

So, with this morning's reading, we begin with the crowd. And if you look at the end of the reading, we have returned to the crowd. So in the Markan sandwich, they are the bread. We then have something about Jesus's family – who also appear towards the end of the reading, just before the crowd. So, in our sandwich, they are the butter. After the family we hear about the scribes, and, once again, they appear at the end of the reading, before the family. Depending on how you make your sandwiches, perhaps they are the relish or mustard. And then the main filling of the sandwich is the parable of Satan's end.

The reason it is helpful to recognise this literary structure is that it helps us to make sense of the passage. The most important part is what appears right in the middle. So this is a story which is telling us that Jesus has come to bring the reign of Satan to an end. Even though those around him are questioning his authority, Jesus makes it clear that he is from God, not Satan, and that in the end God's power will triumph over evil.

And if that lies at the heart of the story, we can make more sense of what frames it, too. Wrapped around the parable of Satan's end are the scribes, who are setting themselves in opposition to Jesus. Who are suggesting that the work of Jesus is the work of the devil. For whatever reason – perhaps because they are too wedded to their own power, or perhaps because they are simply too blind – they refuse to see the truth in Jesus's good works. Even Jesus's own family are wavering. They, too, seem to want to hide Jesus away. Whether they are afraid for him, or fearful for themselves, they are also wondering whether he is possessed by a demon.

The crowd, on the other hand, continues to want to listen to Jesus. They continue to gather around him. Perhaps some of them have been inspired by what he has said; others by the healings he has performed. Perhaps some are curious, and others more convinced. In the structure of this passage, the gospel writer invites us to consider where we stand. At the heart of the story is the defeat of evil, and the question for each one of us is whether we, like the scribes, will stand against all that is of God; whether, like Jesus's family, we lack courage; or whether we know whose side we are on. Jesus is clear that we can all be his brothers and sisters if we recognise his words and works as coming from God.

It sounds simple, doesn't it? Set out in Mark's gospel, knowing all that we do about all that will happen to Jesus, we know exactly whose side we are on. And yet life doesn't always feel so straightforward. Sometimes the difference between right and wrong is very obvious, but often it isn't. More than that, though, there are different levels on which we all live. There are injustices taking place across the world that we can feel entirely powerless to change.

Perhaps that is why we have the reading from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians set alongside the gospel reading from Mark. In what Paul is saying, he recognises that we live in a world where there are injustices, yet he urges us not to lose heart because we believe in something bigger. He encourages us to remember what is set out in the gospel reading, that Jesus really has overcome the power of evil, even though we are living in the "now but not yet."

And if we return to the detective dramas with which I began, perhaps the point is that we need both kinds of story. We need to have Miss Marple and Inspector Morse to show us right and wrong; to remind us that there are times when right and wrong are very clear, and we need to choose which side we are on; and to give us hope in an eternal future of justice and equality. Yet we also need to remember that sometimes here and now things just aren't so clear; most of us inhabit grey areas, not just black and white. We need the complex reality of Line of Duty.

The message of the gospel reading is that, even when it feels we are powerless to change things, or because we can't quite see clearly where truth lies, it still matters how we respond to what we see going on in the world. It still matters who we choose to follow. What we do still matters. It is a message of hope, that even though the overall situation may not change immediately – indeed in this world the victory of good over evil will always be incomplete – yet each of our actions and responses still makes a difference, because history is changed gradually and painstakingly by each individual who chooses to live out God's call. No matter what it costs.

Amen