

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 3:20-35

***"Family Ties"***

Today's Holy Gospel has some very important things happening – all at the same time! Word of what Jesus has been doing is spreading to Jerusalem. As a matter of fact it is spreading all over – especially to Nazareth. Public opinion is growing and the Temple Leadership is trying to help pour negative fuel to the mix and onto the fire – even calling Jesus crazy! The swirling news about Jesus' remarkable teaching, healings and casting out of demonic spirits is spreading like wildfire. Adding insult to injury it would appear that Jesus' own family begins to think that He's mad, spreading even to that part of the people that concerns itself with the ancestral traditions of Israel?

The early church certainly didn't make up the story about people saying Jesus was mad, or even in league with the devil. Please turn with me to today's Holy Gospel – Mark chapter 3, beginning at verse 20 on page 1560 of your Pew Bible. We see in verse 20 that the crowds are gathering even in the house that Jesus and the Apostles are staying at, and are so "needy" that they are not leaving Jesus alone, so much so that they are unable to eat. Verse 21 shows us how Jesus' family feels about the hubbub. "*When His family heard about this, they went to take charge of Him, for they said "He is out of His mind."*" One translation and I did check many, said – "*to go take him into custody.*" They questioned His very well being. You don't take someone into custody unless they are not well, or at least in your estimation. We will return to this in just a little bit.

For Jews – right from the very beginning - a close family bond was part of their God-given fabric of thinking and living. Be loyal to the family was the backbone of loyalty to Israel as the people of God. If you break that link you've undermined a major pillar in the way Jews in the first century and even in the twenty-first, think and feel about the world and themselves. Throughout the Gospels you can see that Jesus was quite capable of challenging the symbols at the heart of the Jewish sense of identity. The solidarity of the family was right up there with observing the Sabbath, the food laws, and other unique signs of Jewish identity. It was tradition for being loyal to the ancestors and of course to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Apparently, Mary, Jesus' mother, at this early stage of Jesus' ministry didn't have any idea what He was up to. She apparently had heard things. If you stop and think about this – didn't Mary ask Jesus to change the water into wine? Yes, she knew who He was, but she might not have expected the type of response that was happening. She had brought the rest of the family to Capernaum from Nazareth in order to find Him and take Him away, to stop Him from behaving in such an outrageous fashion, bringing dishonor to the family name. As we read in verse 21 they thought He was "*out of His mind.*" It is not time for Jesus to extinguish the fire, but instead Jesus just makes matters worse. He slices through the whole traditional structure in one fell swoop. We will soon see that Jesus has a different mission, and it involves breaking hallowed family ties. God is doing the unthinkable: He is starting a new family, a new holy people, and is doing so without regard for ordinary human family bonds. But before we get to that, we hear from the teachers of the Law who follow Jesus around and are trying to trip Him

up. They arrive first, from Jerusalem. Look at verse 22 and see what they say: “*He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.*”

People only say that kind of thing when the stakes are raised, when something is happening for which there is no other explanation – and in this case, when a power is at work to heal people who seem to be in the grip of demonic forces. John the Baptist said that Jesus was “*one more powerful than I.*” (Mark 1:7) In verse 27 Jesus now speaks about tying up the strong man and plundering his house, He wants us to understand that He is now acting as the Stronger One, who has won an initial victory over the enemy (referring to the temptation by the devil in the wilderness just after His baptism in the Jordan) and He is now on a mission – heading directly into the enemy’s territory. The teachers of the Law, of course, don’t like what He’s doing because it doesn’t fit into their agenda. Jesus isn’t one of them and so they feel He must be discredited and labelled so that people will no longer take Him seriously. They say Jesus has got to be in league with the arch-demon, Beelzebul, and even worse, they say He is possessed by Beelzebul. They were trying to stack the deck against Jesus and this would justify them doing anything they wanted to control Him, to contain Him, or even to silence Him forever! I just love it that Jesus doesn’t respond in a way that we might; He doesn’t lash back with an instant label or retort for the scribes. He simply points out the flaw in their thinking. In verses 23 to 26 Jesus shows them the flaws in their logic. If the enemy, the accuser (the word in Hebrew is ‘*the satan*’, which by now had become a proper name without losing its original meaning) were to cast out “the satan,” he (or it) is fighting against himself. If civil war breaks out in a kingdom, it’s the end of the kingdom; and closer to home if members of a household start fighting among themselves, it’s the end of the family unit. So if the devil is fighting the devil, the devil’s kingdom is obviously coming to an end. And so even if the scribes’ analysis of the situation is correct, the kingdom of “the satan” is toppling. Let’s see if I can clear this up a little bit: if you decide that the doctor who is offering to perform a life-saving operation on you is in fact a sadistic murderer, you will never give your consent to the operation, right? I know I wouldn’t. There is no middle ground. Jesus isn’t just a ‘mildly interesting historical figure’, as some in today’s world would label Him, or as a prophet, or a “great teacher” – there are lots of labels that have been bandied around trying to neutralize Jesus and keep Him out the way. He is either the one who brought God’s kingdom, or He is a dangerous madman. Like famous Anglican author C. S. Lewis said – “*Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or He is Lord.*” You are here on a Sunday morning because you believe that Jesus is Lord! Those who preach and live by Jesus’ message need to be on the alert for opposition of all sorts; there is a war going on and sometimes it is subtle, sometimes threatening, and must learn how to respond.

But why did they think Jesus might be in league with the enemy? With the satan? Because the alternative was that Jesus really was acting in the power and spirit of Israel’s God Himself. That would mean that everything else He was doing – welcoming outcasts, announcing the kingdom in a way which stood everything upside down, refusing to endorse a program of national liberation – would all be God’s work, even though it seemed, to the Pharisees at least, as though it was going in exactly the opposite direction to what THEY thought God wanted.

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The Pharisees, as much as they hated Jesus, did not deny His miracles, which were too numerous and too well known to deny. Remember, word of His work had spread, so much so that crowds were gathering even in the home they were staying, to the point of interfering with being able to eat! Even though the miracles were all miracles of help and healing, the Pharisees attributed them to satanic origin. They had a simple choice— either they accepted the miracles as from God, in which case they had to accept Jesus, or the miracles had to be done in the power of Satan, since they were clearly supernatural and superhuman in origin. I want to suggest to you that it was their own accusations, rather than Jesus' miracles, that were inspired by "the satan," by the enemy, by Satan. Their choice to do this put them almost beyond redemption. In Luke's Gospel chapter 12 verse 10 the unpardonable sin is connected with the denial of Christ: *"everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven."* Jesus seems to make a distinction between sin against Himself and sin against the Holy Spirit. In Mark 3:28-29 Jesus says it this way *"I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them." "But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin."* Rejecting Jesus, while He was on earth and rejecting His work which as of yet was unfinished, and even when His disciples did not understand Him, Jesus said was forgivable. But after His work was completed and the Holy Spirit had come, and access to God Himself, when the Temple veil was torn in two, when the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost, when that happened, then the deliberate, final rejection of the Holy Spirit's offer of Jesus Christ's Divinity and His offer of salvation would constitute the eternal sin for which there is no forgiveness, EVER! It is not always the vocal opponents of Christ who commit the unforgivable sin. Paul, when he was still Saul of Tarsus, was as vocal and active against Christ as anyone, he persecuted Christians, He wanted Peter's head on a stick - yet Jesus called him personally to be His apostle on the road to Damascus. The deliberate, final rejection of the Holy Spirit's offer of Jesus is more likely to result in a total indifference rather than a vocal opposition to Christ.

I'll bet you thought I forgot about Mary, Jesus' mother and His family? Let's look at verses 31-35 *"Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him." "A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.""* Remember what they had been thinking? They thought He was "out of His mind!" This is proof that their words or thoughts were not unforgivable. Jesus then goes on to answer with a question: *"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.* *"Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."* Jesus' reply teaches that spiritual ties are stronger than natural ties and He suggests that His family was no closer to Him than anyone else who does the will of God.

By the way – please don't worry about Jesus' mother Mary or His brothers. We know that Mary stood at the foot of His cross, faithfully standing by her Son, and both scripture and tradition tell us that Jesus' brothers James and Jude not only became His followers, disciples of Jesus, but wrote the Epistles of James and Jude.

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God began a new tradition, a new family, one that would center around the belief and acceptance of His Son, Jesus of Nazareth; one whose family ties would require a rebirth - both of heart and spirit – just like Jesus told Nicodemus in John chapter 3. Remember last weeks' sermon and Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be reborn? It troubled Nicodemus – and then Jesus told him that *“God so loved the world that He sent His One and only Son – that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life!”* We are familiar with the strength and blessing of this family that we call the Body of Christ – as we personally experience the power of that sense of family right here at St. Andrew’s Anglican Church! *“Here are my mother and my brothers!”* *“Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.”*