

## **Sermon Trinity 1: 2 Corinthians 4.13 – 5.1; Mark 3.20 – end**

In May 2019, the BBC website carried an item with the headline: Football racism: 'Monkey chants aimed at children.' The report went on to quote Mr Maravia, the chief executive of a Leicestershire Community Football Academy, who said some of his under-14s once left the pitch in tears, despite winning, because of abuse. He added that among the abuse victims were children as young as seven. He'd also heard "monkey chants" at an under-nines game and told how a parent once offered a banana to a child, saying they "should be used to it".

In the same year, a banana was thrown onto the pitch in a match between Arsenal and Tottenham just after one of Arsenal's black players had scored.

It goes without saying that such racism is unacceptable, but what lies beneath such behaviour? By associating the victim with monkeys, presumably because of their skin colour and their African origins, they are being dehumanised. And once you have dehumanised them, it doesn't matter that you are abusing them. They're not like us, so it doesn't matter how appallingly you treat them. Put a label on them and you can do what you like.

There is something similar happening in our gospel reading this morning. What Jesus has been doing must have made a significant impact on the Jewish authorities for the scribes to have travelled all the way from Jerusalem to Galilee, some 70 miles as the crow flies, and longer by road.

And it wasn't just because he was conducting exorcisms that they were worried - exorcisms were quite common at the time – more likely it was his radical teaching that was concerning them. So they decided that the best way of dealing with him was to discredit him, by saying that his ability to heal stemmed from the fact that he was, as we might say, literally in league with the devil. Put a label on him and you can do what you like.

However, as we heard, Jesus is easily able to counter their argument by pointing out that civil war between the demons would soon see their power destroyed.

He then goes on – in the parable about it being necessary to bind a strong man before robbing his property – to explain the true situation. At this point it's important to bear in mind that parables are intended to make a general point, not to be subjected to detailed analysis and line by line comparisons drawn out.

So this parable has nothing to say about breaking and entering. Nor is it a felon's guide to success.

The point that Jesus is making is that the forces of evil are powerful and difficult to overcome, but if he is able, in the language of the time, to cast out demons, then he must be stronger than the forces of evil ranged against him.

The ultimate demonstration of this is the Resurrection.

On the cross, Jesus has taken the very worst that evil can do – the Son of God has been put to death – but the Resurrection shows that ultimately good is greater than evil; the forces of life stronger than the forces of death.

Jesus' casting out demons as a healing process in his earthly ministry is symbolic of and a precursor to his greater triumph over evil on the cross.

So the claim by the scribes that Jesus is able to cast out demons because he has made a pact with the Prince of Demons is a complete travesty.

It shows the total blindness of the scribes as to who Jesus is and what he is demonstrating in his healing ministry – the love that God has for his creation.

But their claim that what he does he does because of this pact with evil, enables them to label him as a public enemy and ultimately, to their way of thinking, to bring about what they believe is his downfall – execution.

The irony, of course, is that it is ultimately their own downfall that they bring about, for it is their failure to recognise the goodness and love of God at work through Jesus that leads Jesus to say that “people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness and is guilty of eternal sin.”

What Jesus is **not** saying is that God is a vindictive figure looking to catch people blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, or that it's OK to take God's and Jesus' name in vain, but not the Holy Spirit's. Rather, I think, he is suggesting that people such as the scribes who can only see Jesus as being a force for evil are damning themselves.

If they can't see the **love** of God being demonstrated in all that Jesus said and all that he did, if they can't see in him the values of God's kingdom, then they will never recognise how far they fall short of God's standards and their own need for repentance and forgiveness.

If they can only attribute Jesus' healing ministry to the forces of evil, they will never understand the salvation which he brings to the world – and it's worth bearing in mind that both Hebrew and Greek use the same word for healing and for salvation.

It's important, I think, that we understand that those who fall foul of Jesus' comment that those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, do so because of their own inability to see, or their wilful refusal to see the goodness and the all-embracing love which is Jesus. They bring their fate, whatever that may be, on themselves. If they cannot **see** the truth of Jesus, then they cannot **benefit** from the truth of Jesus.

I've laboured this point, because there are those who go through their lives unnecessarily concerned that they may have unwittingly blasphemed against the Holy Spirit.

The truth is that if they are worried about it, then they won't have committed this sin; it's because they recognise the goodness and the greatness of God that they recognise their own unworthiness and their need for forgiveness, and forgiveness God is always ready to give.

That, I think, is the key message, and one that is most comforting, that we should take away from this morning's gospel, for Jesus says very forcefully that "people will be forgiven their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter." The only proviso, made clear to the scribes and also to us, is that we must recognise and accept our need for forgiveness. And that, presumably, is part of the reason why we are here this morning.

But the scribes aren't the only people who at this stage fail to recognise who Jesus is. There's his own family who also feel the need to journey some thirty miles to Galilee from Nazareth to restrain Jesus, because the word on the street is that he has taken leave of his senses.

Although they don't at this stage recognise that Jesus is the Messiah, one of his family, at least, does do so eventually, for we are told in Acts that his brother, James, becomes a leading figure in the early church.

Given Jewish belief about both physical and mental ill-health being the consequence of evil, or caused by the forces of evil, accusing Jesus of being mad is on a par with accusing him of being in league with the devil, but clearly

James is forgiven this blasphemy – a further demonstration of God’s generosity in forgiveness.

However, there is a challenge for the whole world in this episode. Just as his brother James, and no doubt, others had to ask themselves whether Jesus really was the Messiah, or whether his claims to be so were the claims of a madman, so all those today who encounter Jesus must ask themselves the same question: was Jesus mad, or is he the son of God.

There really is no half-way point. If the answer is that he is the Son of God, then we need to take what he has to say very seriously indeed.

One final point, intended to clear up another potential misunderstanding:

When Jesus is told that his family is outside waiting for him and he first asks, “Who are my mother and brothers?” then says that “whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother,” he is not undermining the role of the family.

Rather he is suggesting that there may be occasions when our allegiance to God has to take precedence over our allegiance to our family.

Indeed, Jesus demonstrated this in his own life, when, in his early thirties, he left his family carpenter’s business and in answer to God’s call began the life of a wandering preacher, with as he put it, nowhere to lay his head. And no doubt, his mother wondered why her eldest son wasn’t settling down with a nice Jewish girl and giving her grandchildren to dote over.

As I think all of you know, we’ve experienced something of this in our own family, with our eldest daughter, her husband and three of our grandchildren leaving this country to work as missionaries in Japan.

We would dearly have loved them to remain close to home in this country, so that we could dote on **our** grandchildren, but if that is what God is calling them to, then that is what they must do.

The compensation for us has been in this, and in other matters, the support which we have had from that other family of ours – the church family, or as Jesus put it, “those who do the will of God.” They are his brothers and sisters and mothers. And by implication, He is our brother – what a thought that is!

Last Sunday, Trinity Sunday, we were thinking of the relationship of the three persons of the Holy Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This Sunday we are being invited to become part of that relationship.

So then, three things to take away from our Gospel reading this morning:

Is Jesus the Son of God, and if he is, what does that mean for us? Secondly, a recognition of how great is God's love for us and how generous is his forgiveness. And finally, how important the church family should be in the life of a Christian.