



# *Second Sunday after Pentecost*

## *Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright*



Sunday 6 June 2021

### READINGS

1 Samuel 8: 4-11; Psalm 138; 2 Corinthians 4: 13 - 5: 1; Mark 3: 20.35

*“And when his family heard about this, they went out to seize him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.”*

Mark 3:21

Good morning friends. Mark 3:20-35 is a significant passage for in it we get an astonishing glimpse into the life, and mind, of the historical Jesus. The passage speaks to the issues of demon-possession, mental illness and, to some extent, the effect this can have on families. It is an important passage for it affords us the opportunity to speak about mental well-being in church, which is something we seldom get to do. Part of the reason why modern western societies suffer a deficit in this area is because we have compartmentalised health. Whereas health should be understood holistically, we think that so long as we are physically healthy we are fine, and we then tend to neglect our spiritual, emotional, and mental health.

In our Gospel reading we see Jesus' own family wanting to restrain him on the basis of their belief that he is mentally insane. Surprisingly, the NRSV inaccurately translates verse 21 of chapter 3 by using the word “people” in place of the third person pronoun “they”. All other versions I have consulted use “they” which is faithful to the Greek. In other words, it would seem that the verse is meant to communicate that, in fact, Jesus' family believed him to be mentally unwell.

This fits with the larger context of the passage and passes also the criterion of embarrassment which states that, in trying to deduce historically accurate information about Jesus based on the Gospels, those details which are potentially more embarrassing are to be preferred as more historically reliable. For example, the notion that Jesus fraternised with people of morally questionable standards, based on this criterion, is likely to be true.

Substituting “they” for “people” in Mark 3:21 certainly subtracts some of the embarrassment from the statement.

When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." (*New International Version*)

When his family heard what was happening, they tried to take him away. “He’s out of his mind,” they said. (*New Living Translation*)

And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind.” (*English Standard Version*)

When His family heard about this, they went out to take custody of Him, saying, “He is out of His mind.” (*Berean Study Bible*)

And those belonging to Him having heard, went out to seize Him; for they were saying, "He is out of His mind." (*Berean Literal Bible*)

And when his friends heard of it, they went out to lay hold on him: for they said, He is beside himself. (*King James Bible*)

But when His own people heard about this, they went out to lay hold of Him, for they said, “He is out of His mind.” (*New King James Version*)

And when His own people heard about this, they came out to take custody of Him; for they were saying, “He has lost His senses.” (*New American Standard Bible*)

But later in the passage we hear that, apart from Jesus’ family believing him to be insane, the Jewish authorities accuse him of being demon-possessed. Now one might imagine that this claim was made by them to discredit Jesus and his ministry. But what basis was there for such a claim? Usually, the claims and the charges brought against Jesus by his opponents, are distortions of something of historical basis. The charge of tax evasion, for example, seems to have historical basis in Luke 20:24-25. The charge that Jesus wished to destroy the temple is based almost certainly on his historical prophecy of its destruction. What behaviour then, on the part of Jesus, merited the accusation that he was demon-possessed, even if this was a distortion of the truth?

While not wishing to dismiss the validity of demon possession as a phenomenon, modern mental health experts have consistently noted similarities in the symptoms and

manifestations of certain kinds of mental illness and demon possession. We also know, from the work of Franz Fanon in the field of psychiatry, that, in situations of colonial oppression there is a marked increase in various mental maladies, which to a person subscribing to a traditional worldview might describe as demon possession. First century Judea and Galilee were colonies of one of the most powerful and brutal empires to have ever existed. It is no coincidence that, on exorcising the Gerasene demoniac, the demoniac informs Jesus that his name is *Legion*, the term for a particular unit of the Roman military.

In fact, if we survey the prophets of the Old Testament we find that they often behave in quite strange ways, ways which do not conform to the norms and mores of conventional society. To be possessed was a phenomenon which, if not common, was at least partially understood in ancient Israel. The prophets were possessed by God's Spirit and, in entering the ecstasies during which they issued their prophecies, they effectively lost control of their faculties and were at the mercy of the spirit which possessed them. Paul encourages his congregations to discern the spirits, suggesting presumably that in the context of prophecy in the early Church, people could be motivated or possessed by good and bad spirits.

Though it is difficult to imagine, and though the cult of Mary, and by extension Mary's relationship with Jesus, is a cherished tradition in the life of the Church, Mark 3 actually indicates a breakdown in Jesus' familial relationships, or at least a breakdown of relationship between himself and his family. We cannot speculate as to the pressures placed on these relationships nor on whether Jesus' mental state contributed to these, but by verse 33 Jesus seemingly renounces family ties, replacing them with members of the Church (or in fact, his followers).

As mentioned in the beginning, these aspects give us not only a surprising and informative view into the life and mind of Jesus, but they are also occasion for considering mental illness in the context of religion and in the context of our faith. More than two thirds of the recorded miracles of Jesus are acts of healing, many of these in turn are exorcisms. This tells us that Jesus cared deeply not just for the physical well-being of the people he ministered to, but for their holistic well-being that is, their emotional and mental well-being too. In our understanding of the Church's mission we would do well to take cognizance of this.

Amen.