

‘Perhaps he’s out of his mind...’ ‘The devil makes him do it...’ These are the conclusions that those closest to the situation offer, where Jesus is concerned. One is grounded in the loving concern of his family. The other is a ‘learned defence’ against his representation of the work of God, the love of God, and the kingdom of God. Both are positions of fear.

It is fear that drives Jesus family to call to him - fear that leads them to declare him crazy. In their fear, they think they might protect him, or at least excuse him of the spectacle he is making. Claiming an alliance with God - healing, breaking sabbath laws - it was all too new; too terrifying.

Likewise the authorities were frightened. A new, popular preacher was among them - flaunting the rules, urging people to seek God outside the system. Theirs was a fear expressed as “we’ve never done it that way...” Jesus is talking about God in a way that makes folks question the previous, ‘easy’ answers that religious institutions are so happy to provide. “He has a demon...” they say, because if you don’t understand it, or cannot explain it, it must be evil...right?

Fear drives us to do all manner of horrible and inexplicable things. Instead of new insight and understanding, we are too often prone to fear when faced with something or someone who is different than us. We have, for centuries, been drawing the wrong conclusions about those with different cultural practices, different languages, different ways of seeing the world.

Even among otherwise ‘like-minded people’, a new idea or discovery can cause huge problems. We are seeing that happen every day of the week as the politics of our so called ‘western democracies’ turn into mean-spirited shouting matches between right and left. The Christian Church - an institution founded around the ideas of Jesus, who preached love, compassion and hope in the name of God (who seems to pay particular attention to the weak, the widowed, the stranger and the poor...) - this church has a disturbing history of tearing itself in pieces every 500 years or so. From the outside, it must seem like the only thing we agree on is how to fight about what we believe.

And so has it always been...there’s always someone in the family who knows the right way to behave - who is quick to challenge behaviour that falls outside the lines - who will correct us to protect us. There will always be those in the church who imagine that their job is to keep the rest of us on the straight and narrow. Their “*fear of* the Lord” has become ‘*fear for* the Lord’, whom they must protect at all costs. Nothing new. Nothing radical. God is eternal and unchanging (they say) and so must our ideas about God, our approach to God, and our witness to God remain ever the same.

To the fears of his family, Jesus offers a strange dismissal - “those who do the will of God are my family”. But to those who claim he is actually working in the enemy camp, Jesus has a most particular argument - and most effective. “Satan can’t cast out himself.” Evil vs. Evil results in a bigger disaster. This seems strangely prophetic in an age of nearly continual conflict.

(Each time we stand up against ‘the enemy’ using the enemy’s own tricks - hoping only that our guns, our bombs, and our tactics are ‘bigger and better’ - everyone loses. The misery of war extended out only in the last century - in various places, between a wide variety of opponents - ought to prove my point.)

But Jesus isn’t concerned with prophecy here - he is talking about religious matters - interpretation and proclamation. He has been following a path of love, guided by God’s Spirit; teaching, healing and bringing hope - all things that should be the concern of those who claim to honour God. But the maintenance of the faith has become more important than expressions of faith. These ‘scribes from Jerusalem’ - the spiritual capital - have orthodoxy (Proper practice) on their minds. And Jesus doesn’t fit any of the established patterns. He must be feared. He must be silenced.

I wish I could tell you that the church has learned it’s lesson since this unsettling episode. Jesus, in his own defence, actually makes his opponents more determined. That bit about the ‘binding of the strong man’ seems to be an accusation that they (the scribes) have broken in to God’s house and plundered it. They have made God their prisoner, controlling access, controlling worship, controlling faith (which, in truth, is a gift FROM God before it is an attitude towards God)

This continues to happen, in spite of Jesus warning that the presumption that we know better than God what it is that God wants, needs or desires is ‘an eternal sin’. Such behaviour is considered (by Jesus in this instance) unforgivable -

The impasse in Mark’s gospel will remain unresolved until Jesus trial and execution. The authorities will continue to monitor Jesus’ activity, to evaluate his theology, to criticize the way he lives out his beliefs. They will imagine themselves vindicated when the tomb is sealed, but they are mistaken - it is not finished. In matters of justice, compassion and love, God will not be denied. Death is no deterrent. Fear - even the most primal fear - is swept away by the love that raises Jesus from the tomb. Fearlessness is the most striking characteristic of Jesus disciples after his resurrection. Fear - of the kind that promotes discrimination because it is familiar; that silences fresh thinking, and craves certainty at the expense of wonder; that clings to power for the sake of power - this kind of fear has no place in the church.

Until we claim the freedom from fear that the risen Christ offers us, we are doomed to dwell on our differences - doomed, in the highest courts of the church - to argue about who belongs and who does not. This is foolish behaviour among those who claim to believe that "Christ died that we might have life abundant..."

We are left to decide what the will of God may be. Jesus offers no real clarity there. (and let's remember that anyone who claims faith is likely to be claiming to follow the will of God). We can only measure our efforts against the work of Jesus, revealed in Scripture. Work that liberated rather than held captive (even the 'demons' cast out - not bound up...) Work that demonstrated a desire for understanding and compassion and the collective good. Jesus' aim was to make the family bigger, not to circle the wagons. God's spirit pushes doors open, and knocks down walls, the better to reveal God's glory.

So may we be led, as we stumble our way towards the promise, one slow, challenging step at a time.