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Sermon

It's War!

Mark 3:20-35; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

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War Declared!

Genesis 3:15 reads, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

So God spoke to the tempter and so that conflict, that hostility was bound to be expressed in the life of the Son of Man, the perfect man, the Son of God.

He did not come to be "gentle Jesus meek and mild." He came to establish a Kingdom – to take back territory which had been usurped by an enemy. That territory was and is human hearts.

Background

Now we are through the period of Lent, Easter and Pentecost, the Lectionary continues with a journey through Mark's Gospel. So far in the account, Jesus has arrived on the public scene. John the Baptist announced his coming and baptised him so commissioning him for his ministry. At that time, a voice came from heaven, saying, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."¹

Jesus passed through a period of testing and temptation and then returned and started to preach. As he did he gathered disciples. We are told a few of the events: the healings, the exposure and casting out of demons, the authority with which he spoke.²

A leper was cleansed of his disease; a paralysed man was restored to walk again. Jesus reinterpreted the Law and claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath. He deliberately chose to heal a man on the Sabbath incurring the fury of the religious leaders. However, great crowds of the common people followed him. This is the background to today's gospel reading.

He had been doing a lot of healing and many times Mark records others who were oppressed by demons coming to him and finding freedom as well.

In Acts 10:38, we hear Peter speaking of Jesus' ministry which he characterised like this:

"God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and ... he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him."

¹ Mark 1:11

² Mark 1:23-27

Jesus' ministry was war against the devil. And there was a counter-attack. First of all it came through his family.

Counterattack

Word had got back to Nazareth, and Jesus' mother and brothers decided that he had gone mad. When they come to get him, they find that the crowd following him is so great that he and his disciples cannot even stop for a meal. Now for some mothers that is proof of insanity! Skip one meal and you will collapse, two and you're dead!

The family were ignorant - John records in chapter 7:5 that "... even Jesus' own brothers did not believe in him." But there he was the incarnate Creator, the Lord of Glory, being called insane.

Jesus didn't reject his family – he rejected their reading of his mental condition and refused to be diverted from his calling. He still honoured his mother and his obligations to her. We see that when he entrusted her care to John at the cross.

Jesus' mission from the Father had greater importance than the family's understanding and concerns. God has a higher call on us than our family as well. Sometimes there will be a conflict of loyalties and we need to put God's call on us first.

As you know, Helen and I went to England for a short trip in 1997 but then were called to stay on indefinitely. Naturally, my mother missed us, she would far rather we were near her in Auckland. She did however understand about God's guidance. She once said, "If God is calling you to stay then you must do it but if not please come back." However, family are not always so understanding.

The other attack on him is from the Teachers of the Law. They have already closed their minds against him. Back at the beginning of the chapter Mark recorded the healing of the man with a shrivelled hand. Let's pick up the account at verse 2:

Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. ³ Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." ⁴ Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. ⁵ He looked round at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. ⁶ Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.³

Not only are their minds closed, but the two rival groups, the Pharisees and the Herodians, who despise each other have already agreed to find a way to kill him.

In today's reading, they accuse him of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub – another name for Satan. They know they can't deny the miracles or deliverances everyone has seen but they can twist things to suggest he uses evil not good to these miracles.

Jesus responds by showing that this was both illogical and blasphemous. If Satan were empowering Jesus to cast out demons, he would be fighting against his own servants. Kings don't order their soldiers to attack their own troops. It is illogical.

In 1995, we visited Toronto to see what was happening in what looked like a revival. There was quite a lot of criticism at the time with some writers suggesting that it was demonic. After I had been in the church for about ½ hour, I was convinced that it was the work of the Holy Spirit. I remember saying to myself, "I recognise the presence of God here. This is the same Spirit I have known, the Holy Spirit. How dare people who haven't even visited call it demonic!"

One thing that worried some people was, I think, a misunderstanding. Most people who had been prayed for were joyous or peaceful. However, a few showed minor distress which could have been a deliverance occurring. In more dramatic cases, I know the leaders took them aside for their privacy.

³ Mark 3:2-6

I think some people thought that those people exhibited the spirit which had been imparted rather than what was been driven out. A better, and I think more accurate, interpretation was that the Holy Spirit was active to drive out the unclean spirits.

The second point Jesus made in the reading was that it is blasphemous to call this power which he exercised demonic. He said he did those things by the Holy Spirit. His attackers said it was by an evil spirit. To call the Holy Spirit evil is a very serious sin. Why is it so serious? Because it is the Holy Spirit who convicts us and draws us to repentance. If we shut ourselves off from him, we shut ourselves off from the only road back to God. And with that door closed there is only judgement ahead.

Some people get very frightened they have committed the unforgivable sin. Let me assure you, if you are concerned you have committed it, you definitely have not! The person who may be in danger would be dismissive and scoffing of such a notion at the very least.

Superstition?

The reading has brought up the subject of demons. Don't think that this is first century superstition. I have been involved in a good number of deliverances and I have seen the change it brings for the afflicted. Just in the last month, Helen and I have been called by two families from outside the parish to deal with what they recognised as spiritual oppression. One involved poltergeist activity in the house.

In both cases, it was involvement in the occult which opened the families up to these troubles. God keeps us safe from this stuff unless we press our way into it against his warnings. They had been involved in clairvoyance, spiritualism, tarot cards and occult healing practices. In both cases, they had received a real fright and realised they should have nothing further to do with those practices. They needed to repent and then we commanded the evil to go in Jesus' name. The result was peace. Sometimes it is only when you have not known peace that you appreciate having it.

Don't be afraid

Don't be afraid! Jesus himself has all authority in heaven and on earth. He declared it in Matthew 28:18 "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. "

Jesus has the authority and he gives it to followers. When the seventy-two returned from the ministry trip he had sent them on they gave a report to him:

Luke 10:17-20 The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

The strong man principle

Not only does Jesus clarify the source of his power, his authority and the protection he affords but he also teaches of an approach to deal with the demonic. Using an analogy of natural conquest, he points out that if you want to take things from someone against their will you have to restrain them first. So first spiritually bind up the powerful spirit acting so you can get the human free from its influence.

War

Jesus was engaged in a spiritual war. We are his followers and must expect the same. Paul tells us in Ephesians that we are involved in a war not against people but against spiritual powers. It is naïve not to recognise it. War involves being alert, guarding, fighting and there will be some losses or damage.

But it is not all hardship; Paul was in the thick of the battle as an apostle. He has described some of his struggles earlier in 2 Corinthians. But he affirms that he speaks and acts out of real conviction. That is his motivation. He suffers but that suffering is matched by inward renewal. His troubles achieve a future glory for him.

When we hear what his troubles were like, we would not call them minor but he compared them with the glory which is to come, and they pale into insignificance. He wrote that they were light whereas there is a great weight of glory to come. The glory is eternal while the troubles are temporary - indeed in comparison

they are merely momentary. So he fixes his eyes on what is eternal and unseen rather than what can be seen which is temporal.

That's quite an oxymoron, to fix your eyes on what is unseen. But he is fixing his attention on what is to come and looking forward to the Resurrection. He is confident that he will be raised with his companions and with the Corinthians Christians, the people of God – that we will all be present with Jesus.

We can learn more of Paul's inner vision from other words he wrote this time to the Ephesian Church:

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people,¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.⁴

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⁴ Ephesians 1:18-23