

# *binding the strong man*

a sermon preached on the  
*second sunday after pentecost*

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

As we know, things move swiftly in Mark's gospel. Mark tends to get to the point without much elaboration. Today, as we enter into these five months of 'Sundays after Pentecost', we return to Mark, to a near-sequential reading of Mark's gospel, with a blast: "When [Jesus'] family heard [of the crowd] they went out to restrain him, for people were saying 'He has gone out of his mind'. And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons'."<sup>1</sup>

These two verses lay bare the two faces of the dramatic collision course Jesus is on: with the traditional idea of kinship; and with the religious-political establishment. On both fronts Jesus engages in a no-holds-barred full frontal assault: he is neither polite, nor 'meek and mild'! In the following chapters, everything he will teach – beginning with the parable of the sower in the next chapter – is to be understood in the light of this full frontal assault.

Considering the first collision, the kinship structure, Mark's Jesus is brutally frank: "His mother and brothers came... and sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and your sisters are outside, asking for you'. And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers'."<sup>2</sup>

There is nothing in Mark's Jesus to support idealised Christian polemic about the relatively recent invention of the 'nuclear family'. Kinship structures tend to be motivated towards status quo, conformity and control. Tribalism and nationalism are larger-scale versions of the same underlying dynamic.

For Jesus, however, the social control mechanisms of traditional kinship structures are likely to be an impediment to the radical call of the good news: Jesus' 'nuclear family' wants to restrain him.<sup>3</sup> For Jesus, the true 'family' is not kinship – nor any other kind of tribal-nationalistic identity. "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."<sup>4</sup> Allegiance to kinship structures – whether nuclear family or any other form of tribalism – stands in the way of allegiance to the kingdom of God, the new humanity which transcends all the old kinship and tribal structures.

Mark's gospel could hardly be clearer. So the pressing question is: how Christianity has managed to turn Jesus' teaching on its head – insisting on allegiance to kinship and 'nuclear family' values being more important than allegiance to Jesus' and his kingdom. How did the church reverse Jesus' radical teaching: and make Jesus into a 'meek and mild' mascot for an unreal and idealised 'nuclear family'?

Turning now to Jesus' second head-on collision: his no-holds-barred assault on the religious-political establishment. In his travels around the Galilee since leaving his Nazareth hometown, Jesus has already violated their rules and crossed the occasional sword with them.<sup>5</sup> Mark's picture is crystal clear: the religious-political establishment have come down from Jerusalem in order to deal with a threat to their claim as the ruling elite. The scribes from Jerusalem are effectively 'government investigators from the capital, ready to press charges'.<sup>6</sup> The accusation that his casting out of demons is by the power of Satan<sup>7</sup> is a desperate tactic. Here we see the age-old war of myths: the attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 3:21-22

<sup>2</sup> Mark 3:31-34

<sup>3</sup> Mark 3:21

<sup>4</sup> Mark 3:35

<sup>5</sup> Mark 1:21-3:6

<sup>6</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988, p164.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 3:22

identify one's perceived enemy in satanic terms, as the 'axis of evil'. Psychologically, we would call this the projection of their unacknowledged shadow.

Jesus' response amounts to the declaration of an ideological war with the scribal establishment: "No one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered".<sup>8</sup> In Mark's gospel, Jesus is the one who will break into the bankrupt house of the scribal-political establishment; bind the 'strong man'; and plunder the house.

However, while everyone can readily understand the idea of such a quasi-military operation – the language of such militarism being in our news almost every day – what no one gets is that Jesus' breaking-and-entering operation is completely non-violent!

So this is the astonishing and barely-believable *evangellion* of Jesus Christ: that Jesus' plundering of the strong man's house is completely non-violent. His breaking-and-entering operation is accomplished, rather, through an act of total self-emptying: "a building from God, a house not made with hands".<sup>9</sup> Unlike the religious leaders who come to accuse him – and all political-economic-religious empires then and now – Jesus accomplishes this binding of the forces of Satan via the means of dying to self.<sup>10</sup>

And this is the Paschal Mystery which is our liberating food at the Table of Christ: at this and every Eucharist, we are practising the evangelical art of self-emptying, which alone binds the strong man, in the service of the new humanity.

The Paschal Mystery, then, is the unexpected, mysterious and thoroughly joy-full force which alone is capable of binding the forces of evil. Mark's purpose is to make it clear that it is possible to embody this Paschal Mystery: that this is what it means to be aligned with God's purposes – what it means to truly be Jesus' family. "We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus".<sup>11</sup>

And this is presumably why all kinds of sin are forgivable. But to refuse the Holy Spirit who animates the self-emptying Paschal Mystery is the one unforgivable sin.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark 3:27

<sup>9</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:1

<sup>10</sup> Mark 9:34-36

<sup>11</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:14