

misnaming

a sermon preached on the
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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Genesis 3:8-15; Psalm 98; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3: 20-35

The gospel reading today begins with anxiety on the part of Jesus' friends and family about his wellbeing and ends with their arrival outside of the house where he is staying. But as often is the case, an incident occurs on the way. Jesus finds himself in conflict in the synagogue because he had cast out demons. The 'powers that be' had sent a deputation down from Jerusalem to see what was going on in Galilee and to check out persistent reports of a charismatic teacher. The resultant incident forms one of several conflict stories that characterise the beginning of Mark's gospel account. Only after the confrontation in the synagogue is over does Jesus' family find him. By that time he is in a house surrounded by people, so packed that it is impossible to gain access. As the narrative unfolds we find a series of changing pictures: family anxiety about a loved one, controversy about exorcism and a radical definition of the family of Christ. These varied scenes have a common thread in the misnaming that recurs. The Scribes, who had come to investigate Jesus' work, ascribe his good actions to Beelzebub, in effect, calling good evil. The crowds identify Jesus' blood relations as his family. It was a natural thing to do. But, this too is a misnaming, because his family is universal; it is made up of kindred spirits, inclusive of all who do the will of God. Let us explore this recurrent misnaming!

Misnaming is no small feature of the human condition. From the arrival of human consciousness on the earth the need to identify right from wrong has been a constant demand on the human soul. In Genesis chapter 3 there is a reminder of how primordial is the responsibility of distinguishing good from evil. To misname, to get the identification wrong, is determinative of happiness or misery. The issue is perennial in human experience and history supplies countless illustrations. For example in 17th century Scotland some 2,000 people, mostly women, were persecuted as witches. With hindsight we now appreciate that eccentric behaviour, social marginalisation and an atmosphere of religious ferment led to the naming as evil what was in fact, vulnerability and powerlessness. The same sort of misnaming happened to the Jews in the Middle Ages and in the 20th century; it also happened as colonising countries named whole cultures as uncivilised. In the past and present misnaming is legion. The human inability to move beyond, or rise above, this tendency takes us into the sphere of the 'mystery of iniquity'. Paradoxically, ironically and sadly, it is the well-intentioned, the devout, the morally crusading who are most liable to succumb to misnaming. The Cross of Christ is iconic of what results when good is called evil and evil good. But, thanks be to God, The Resurrection speaks of God's justification of the misnamed. The One who was despised and rejected recognises as brothers and sisters countless millions who have been misnamed, misrepresented and maligned.

Returning to the gospel reading, in this synagogue incident the compassion of Christ is named as a dark work, the fruit of Jesus' allegiance with Beelzebub. The roots of the name Beelzebub are obscure, perhaps meaning 'Lord of the flies'. As it is used here, it is a name that is synonymous with evil. Jesus noticeably answers the charge through employing reason. Can Satan cast out Satan? Is it possible than an obvious good deed, namely the relief of human suffering, could be the work of an evil power? His accusers have a contorted way of thinking; surely if they had paid heed to experience they would know that two opposing forces of evil self-destruct. There is no self-destruction here – only

wholeness and peace! Jesus, reasons, but, recognises a deeper blindness than reason can touch. To call a work of God a work of Satan speaks of a sickness of the soul that reason alone cannot cure.

Another outworking of this condition is a state of mind which is unable to appropriate forgiveness, even if forgiveness is as near as Jesus was to the two thieves on the cross. Frighteningly, it is a state of mind that can become permanent. Heaven forbid! Yet, apart from the miracle of grace the condition may persist. Happily though, there is a possibility of change, a renewal of mind. We must always hope for it in all and never despair of it in the worst. The heart hardened by the conviction of being right, the mind enslaved to ideology and the will bent on the anvil of prejudice: these can all still be reached by the light that shines in and through experience. Those who have ears to hear—let them hear! Terrorists in Northern Ireland have become peacemakers and, there too, convinced anti catholic preachers have become prophets of a shared future. Experience holds out the possibility of a shaft of light entering the heart of darkness. It is those who gather around the tomb, with intellectual certainty shattered, emotions at sea and wills crumbled by the crucifixion that experiences the peace of Christ.

Our gospel reading ends with another misnaming, somewhat more innocent and natural. The crowds in the house where Jesus abides recognise his mother and brothers and sisters and call to him that his family has arrived. This is, in fact, a unique reference to his sisters. It is an accurate naming, but, it turns out to be partial. Jesus' family extends beyond his relations; it is inclusive of women and men who serve God at any time, in any place. What a wide canopy of grace! What a visionary utterance! This is the charter of a liberal sensibility that has been a distinctive strain in Christianity from the earliest of times to today. Clement of Alexandria, in the third century saw God at work in the enlightened ancients, William Law, the 17th century Anglican mystic, saw God in every heart that turns toward the good, and the twentieth century gave birth to a spiritual openness amongst peoples of many faiths. 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother!' We need to meditate on this truth. It is a challenge as it is a bright hope. Our Lord has given us a precious affirmation that if taken to heart will nudge us, shift us, from the dark tendency to misname. And we need to remember that even our failures come under the canopy of his grace! The dark places of our hearts are enlightened by the utterance of his love!—spoken in and through the length and breadth of experience.