



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

*6th June 2021
1st Sunday after Trinity*

Reflection

Last Sunday we looked at what the Trinity is and how hard it is to explain how anyone can be three in one. We humans need labels, don't we, so that we can neatly file things away in our understanding. It's hard for us to accept when something or someone can't be labelled and absorbed into our system. It's a basic human tendency - once something has a name then we know where to put it and what to do with it.

We see this illustrated very clearly in our Gospel reading from Mark. Firstly we have Mary and her family, the brothers and sisters of Jesus, trying to take him away from what he is doing – preaching and healing and casting out demons, so busy he and his followers don't even have time to eat because there are just so many people needing help. Why? Because he isn't now doing what they expect of him. He isn't living up to the label of oldest son and all that being the oldest son entails. He should be at home with them, playing an active role in their business, possibly even running it now. We don't know what happened to Joseph, but it's assumed that by the time Jesus reached 30, Joseph had died. Traditionally the oldest son would by now be the centre of the family, not running around with a bunch of oddbods from all walks of life. He's not a rabbi or a teacher, he's a carpenter from a small town. They don't know what's going on and want him to pack all this daftness in and come home. One wonders why the people who have been closest to him all his life up until now don't recognise what they have in their midst. Are they genuinely worried about him, thinking he's mad, or are they angry that he's not at home looking after them? Has Mary forgotten the angels who visited her and Joseph and told her how special a child Jesus would be? We'll never know.

If his family is cross, the religious teachers are even more put out by what he's doing. They can't explain Jesus. How does he know all that he teaches, he hasn't done their training or been accredited by them? He isn't part of their system, doesn't live like them or think like them, he is an outsider. They can't do what he can do – they can try to heal someone all day but it isn't going to happen – not like this man who is healing everyone who asks. To them he's someone who, because he does not conform to their thinking or system, needs to be side-lined. He needs a label which makes him less important, easier to control or contain, easier to get rid of. Tom Wright in his book "Mark for Everyone" gives an example of how easily people give labels to each other and the consequences of doing that. He was watching a demonstration on the television news which quickly turned violent. He says "The close-up TV shots, and the recordings of what people were saying at the time, made it clear what had happened. The police had decided that the demonstrators were "scum". The demonstrators had decided that the police were "pigs". Once they had labelled them like that, they could do what they liked. They were no longer dealing with humans, but with animals, and dirty ones at that. Raise the stakes, stick a label on people, and then it doesn't matter what you do and who you hurt." Very quickly Tom Wright saw a demonstration turn into a pitched battle.

And it's still going on all over the world – labelling people because you fear them, don't understand them, or they aren't like you. We can all come up with examples of abuse – due to some-one's colour, where they were born, the colour of their skin, how they live, their sexuality, the list goes on. It starts early with children – like many others I was called "4 eyes" at school because I wore glasses and no-one else did in my class. But adults make it more serious as we see in so many ways and it inevitably leads to misery and violence.

The religious teachers couldn't think of anything better to say about Jesus than if he was doing all this casting out of demons then he must be one himself, in league with the Devil. They couldn't look at him and his actions with open minds, or accept that he was doing God's work, that his power of exorcism and healing was coming from God. It must, they decided, be a bad thing. Jesus is of course far too mature and clever to stoop to their childish name calling and destroys their argument with flawless logic. If they were right, then the devil was fighting himself and that can only end in disaster for the devil. It's the end of his kingdom. A nation at war with itself ends up destroying itself. If a family unit starts fighting amongst themselves, it's the end of that family unit as many divorces prove.

Unknown to themselves, though, the teachers have opened the way for Jesus to point out that, although the Devil is strong, someone has arrived who is even stronger. To burgle a strong man you must first overpower him and tie him up – and that is what Jesus is doing with the Devil. Jesus is stronger and will defeat the Devil even in his own house. He adds a warning though – if anyone labels the work of the Holy Spirit as being that of the Devil, they are committing blasphemy. That will not be forgiven, and this is a very strong statement from Jesus. Today, as then, we need to decide for ourselves if Jesus was God made man, or not. Was he divine and human - or just someone from the history books?

Having dealt with the religious teachers, Jesus now must deal with his family - Mary and her other sons send Jesus a message which is relayed to him by the crowd, who alert him to the fact that his family is outside and looking for him. And Jesus's response is not what anyone would have expected. It's a surprise perhaps to us reading the passage now when he says that the crowd around him are his sisters and brothers, and anyone who does God's will! Doesn't he love and care about his mother and siblings? How could he put strangers before them? Nowadays we are used to families being separated by distance, moving a long way away from your parents and others in your family is quite usual these days – we are probably all good examples of this. Our family is scattered across the globe with members in Britain, France, Australia, and New Zealand. When children grow up, they usually leave home and strike out on their own. But this isn't the case in many non-Western cultures where the family stays together in a very tight knit community, living and working together, often in the same house. For those listening to Jesus it would have been shocking to leave your family like he had done, the height of disloyalty. No wonder the family thought him mad and wanted to drag him back home before he brought any more dishonour to the family name. But Jesus is on a very different path now, a path that will turn upside down the "normal" that everyone took for granted. He is creating a new family in God and is cutting through relationships and family ties.

This is a hard message from him – to leave your loved ones and follow him. It calls for difficult sacrifice. When we have a nice cosy life enjoying time spent with our children, grandchildren, parents, brothers and sisters, how many of us would be willing to give that up to follow the way of Jesus? To replace our loved ones with strangers who are perhaps very different from us? There are those who do, and I am in awe of those in our own congregation who have done just that. Listening to the testimonies over Lent from people who are missionaries or charity workers in some of the most dangerous places in the world, was very humbling. Our chaplain Jamie gave up his life in England to come here and minister to us. Jesus and his call to follow him cuts right through our lives and our worlds. It's a massive challenge to us, to put God first in our lives, before everything and everyone else, to embrace a new family in God. But we all need to be loved, cherished, and welcomed – and that is what awaits us if we tap at God's door and ask to be one of his children.

Amen.

Jane Quarmby, Reader