

The Family Man

Bob Jones - June 7, 2015

Gospel Reading: Mark 3: 20-35

A minister who was given to long sermons once noticed a young man leaving in the middle of the message. As the service was nearing its end, the young man returned. As people were filing out, the minister asked the young man, “Why did you leave in the middle of my message?” “I needed a haircut.” “But couldn’t you have taken care of that before the service?” “I didn’t need a haircut then.” I’ll try to keep this short; the local barbers are closed anyway.

There’s a large helping of Jesus in today’s gospel reading. Another crowd scene, with Jesus (as usual!) delivering quotable one-liners. There’s an encounter with Jesus’s family, sandwiched around an early encounter with the Jewish establishment types – here, the scribes.

Let’s set the scene, then talk about the events that unfold.

The events take place early in Jesus’s ministry. But he’s begun his ministry with a bang! Mark tells us how Jesus healed a man with an unclean spirit, healed many people and performed exorcisms at Simon’s house, conducted a preaching tour throughout Galilee, cleansed a leper, healed a paralytic, invited a tax collector to follow him, healed a man with a withered hand -- **and** bested the Pharisees in several controversies. In short, he’s attracted the attention of lots of people who need healing or want to hear him preach, on the one hand, **and** the attention of the authorities in the Jewish hierarchy on the other.

By this time Jesus has begun to make his home in Capernaum, a town in northern Israel near the Sea of Galilee. And here we have Jesus pursued by yet another crowd. He’s already

being followed whenever people hear he's around. We're told he's in a house, but we are not certain whether it's Jesus's house—or Simon's—or someone else's. And there's a graphic touch I love: "The crowd came together again, so that they [Jesus and his friends] could not even eat." Picture it: "Pass the bread. Can you stand back? I can't reach the bread!"

The Scribes

So, what happens? Let's start with Jesus's tilt with the scribes, who are also in the crowd. Although today's verses describe a point early in Jesus's ministry, we know from earlier in this chapter that the Pharisees were already sharpening their knives for him, looking for a way to discredit him – and much worse if necessary. Here, looking to turn his widely reported exorcisms against him, the scribes, who we're told had come from Jerusalem (an ominous note), were putting it about that, "He has Beelzebul," and, "By the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."

A couple of notes: (1) "Scribes" were religious leaders whose function was to know the intricacies of Jewish law and teach them to the people; one writer says they "belonged to" the Pharisees, but at the very least, if they weren't Pharisees, they were allied with them. Jesus's general complaint against them was that they concentrated on legal formalisms and pettifoggery. They were always trying to catch Jesus out on some point of Jewish law. I understand that the terms "scribe" and "lawyer" were more or less synonymous in Jesus's time. Make of that what you will.

(2) "Beelzebul" is probably a variant of Baal-zebub (2 Kings 1:2-3); he is sometimes referred to as the Prince of the demons. He ranks high in the hierarchy of Hell. The scribes are accusing Jesus of performing his healing miracles by the power of Beelzebul, "the ruler of the demons." Sometimes Beelzebub is equated with Satan; I don't know why. We'll have to live

with that. Anyway, the scribes are seeking to discredit Jesus in the eyes of the people by planting the idea that Jesus has power over the demons he casts out because he wields the power of the Prince of the Demons.

Jesus hears what they're saying and we read: "And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come."

Jesus's point is pretty clear: "How can Satan cast out Satan?" For Satan to oppose himself would be self-destructive and would be the beginning of his end. The images of a house divided against itself and Satan risen up against himself further illustrate the point. This works for me....

"A house divided against itself cannot stand." Here we have another quote of Jesus's that has made its way into history – this time with the help of Lincoln. Jesus may well be the most quoted single person in history.

After another verse, Jesus turns the tables and goes on the offensive: "Truly I tell you – (Notice the "Truly I tell you" – in other translations, it's "Most certainly I tell you," or King James Version's "Verily I say unto you" – when you hear that, get out your pens. These words say, "Listen carefully!" A sermon writer I have read tells us that Jesus uses this phrase 31 times in Matthew, 13 in Mark, 9 in Luke, and 25 in John) – "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"— for they [the scribes] had

said, “He has an unclean spirit.” Here he’s saying: Guys, be very careful when you accuse the Holy Spirit – in me – of being in league with the Devil!

Mark doesn’t tell us what the scribes then did or said. One supposes they caught the next train back to Jerusalem. In any event, it was another win for Jesus. I guess by now the score was Jesus 4 or 5, Scribes and Pharisees nothing. There isn’t as much give and take as in some other encounters between Jesus and his opponents, but it does get the job done. One pictures the onlookers nodding to each other.

The Family

All well and good. But it’s the role of Jesus’s family that catches my eye here. First, the family – Mary and Jesus’s brothers -- learn that people are saying Jesus is “out of his mind” and come to take him home. (Some suggest that people said this because Jesus seemed entranced or possessed when performing exorcisms.)

I’m inclined to think that the family didn’t know what to think. Jesus’ family hasn’t decided on its own that Jesus has gone out of his mind, but has heard reports to that effect. They go to Jesus intending to restrain him, but haven’t yet had the chance to assess the situation for themselves. Still, they don’t seem to think that the talk of Jesus’s being out of his mind is bunk. Their presence does indicate a lack of belief in him and serves to undermine Jesus’ credibility. (Picture it: “Quiet, Jesus is going to speak.” “But who’s that at the back?” “That’s his family; they’ve heard he’s bonkers and want to take him home....”)

Then, later in today’s passage Jesus, for his part, seems to disown his family. We read:
”Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A

crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and 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! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Notice that Jesus's mother and brothers are standing outside—on the edge of the crowd. Does Jesus say, “Oh, hey, make some room here for my family,” or some such? No. He leaves them out there and proceeds to preach about who his real mother and brothers are. (Note, by the way, that Joseph isn't mentioned here, which probably means that he has died. We know nothing about Joseph after he and Mary took their twelve-year-old son to the temple.)

One sermon writer tells us that although Jesus's treatment of his family here this sounds disrespectful, as if Jesus has disowned his mother and brothers, that isn't really the case; Jesus doesn't ask this question to exclude his mother and brothers, but rather to set the stage for expanding the concept of family to include all those who do the will of God. Well, maybe, but I'm inclined to doubt that the crowd saw it that way. To me it showed a general indifference to family that we've seen in other words and actions of Jesus.

In general, this is not one close-knit family.

Jesus and his Family.

I've always sort of wondered about Jesus and his family. Growing up in the Church, I never seemed to pick up much information about them. Now I know why: there isn't much to know.

It looks as if he had a large family, at least if Mark is to be believed. Mark says at Chapter 6, v. 3 that, when Jesus started preaching in Nazareth, people said, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Jose[t] and [Jude] (Judas) and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?”

But the Gospels tell us nothing about his home life with his siblings.

As to his youth, we know little of it from the Gospels. There is the famous story (Luke 2: 41-49) of Jesus accompanying his parents to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover; when the feast is over and his parents set out for Nazareth, he stays behind in the city without telling them. After his parents discover his absence and return to Jerusalem, they find him, after three days’ frantic searching, in the Temple questioning the teachers and rabbis. Mary, like any mother, confronts him: “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house? But they did not understand what he said to them.”

Well, boys will be boys. After this incident, we are led to believe that he was generally a good boy. Luke tells us that after the occasion in Jerusalem, “...he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them.”

There is little of his relationship with his family in his adult years; what we have suggests that the family bonds were not, um, the strongest. There is the famous story in John 2 of the wedding at Cana. Jesus is there with his mother and the wine runs out: “When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” As if to say, “Woman, so what!”

(I take it “My hour is not yet come” means “I’m not ready to reveal myself here,” or some such.) Granted, Jesus then turns the water to wine after all, as his mother seemed to be suggesting. As if to say, “Oh, all right!” John tells us: “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory....” So Jesus actually does what his mother suggests, but only after rebuking her. This would not be a good scripture for Mother’s Day.

Some speculate humorously on Jesus’s relationship with his mother. For example it’s been suggested that the true story of Jesus’s defending the woman accused of adultery, when he said “Let he among you who is without sin cast the first stone” is that a stone actually came from the back of the crowd; Jesus looked over, then said, “Aw, Mom...” Mmmm, probably not.

In the end, Jesus’s relationship with his mother is generally puzzling; there is his slight of her in today’s scripture and his peremptory rebuke of her at Cana, but then at the end we see Mary at the foot of his cross.

There is not much there in the Gospels, but what there is generally suggests conflict or a disconnect. Today’s episode fits with the general disconnect between Jesus and his family. Consider John 7:5, which tells us that not even his brothers believed in him. Or the story of 12-year-old Jesus’s hanging out at the Jerusalem temple and baffling his mother when she scolded him.

It’s been suggested by one writer that, as his family became aware of Jesus’s powers and exceptional nature, they expected him to become the Jewish Messiah, who would free Israel and establish a kingdom of God on earth. Then, when he went in a radically different direction –

hanging out with low-lives, preaching accommodation with Rome, denying that the kingdom he seeks is of this world -- they were baffled and didn't know what to think.

Jesus and Families Generally.

Jesus's relationship with his family, in the few recorded episodes we have, is certainly of a piece with his low enthusiasm for families in general. Recall the story in Luke 9: 57-62, where Jesus tells the man who would follow him but first would bury his father, to "let the dead bury the dead," and suggests to another would-be follower that he's not fit for the kingdom of God if, having committed to Jesus, he first goes to say goodbye to his family.

Conclusion

I guess we'll never know for certain why Jesus didn't have a better relationship with his family. Like a lot of things about him. Perhaps all we can say in the end is that Jesus wasn't a family man.

Thanks for listening.