

Sunday 6th June 2021

Trinity 1 (Proper 10)

Genesis 3: 8 – 15; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 4: 13 – 5: 1; Mark 3: 20 – 35

What image pops into your head if I say 'doctor'? Maybe you think of your own GP but for many of us hearing the word will probably bring to mind a picture of a man wearing a white coat and possibly a stethoscope. Similarly the word 'Muslim' for me gives an image of a woman clothed in black, head to toe, with her face covered – strangely, I rarely think of a male, probably because they don't have a 'uniform' as such but they might be pictured bending or kneeling in prayer.

What about 'Christian'? This one is a little harder for us I guess because we're inside the club and know the diversity that exists within it – if I said 'Evangelical', 'Pentecostal', or 'Roman Catholic' then maybe some images would spring to mind. There have been many stereotypes of Christians over the years, Bible-bashers, hellfire-and-damnation preachers, anti-sex, anti-gays, anti-almost anything.

To complete the trilogy of Abrahamic faiths we have the Jews. The stereotype image here would probably be the Orthodox male with hat, and long side-curls. We tend to lump Jews altogether as a single mass entity but just as there are many denominations of Christians so there are different branches within Judaism, and of course we have to remember that Jewishness is a cultural identity, many Jews are secular, they may follow cultural traditions but not the religious observances.

In Jesus's time, the Pharisees and Sadducees were two distinct groups who had opposing views on things like interpreting the Mosaic laws, and life after death, they really didn't get on with each other. Another group was the Essenes who separated themselves from the world and considered themselves the true form of the faith. Jesus also mentions Scribes, these were men who were experts in studying the scriptures and were known as lawyers.

The Pharisee



Mark, the story-teller, gives us a picture of Jesus more through his actions than his words. By the time we reach today's gospel reading Mark has told us about Jesus's baptism, his time in the desert, his preaching and teaching in a variety of places, the calling of the first four followers, several healings, the outraging of the scribes and Pharisees by eating with tax-collectors and sinners, debating with them questions of fasting and the Sabbath, selecting the twelve who will be his constant companions, and the gatherings of large crowds who had begun to follow Jesus everywhere he went – and we've only reached chapter 3.

None of the gospels tell us much about the childhood of Jesus but from his words and actions as an adult we know that he studied and memorised the scriptures. He knew those scriptures well enough that he could hold his own as a 12-year-old in the Temple amongst the religious teachers, rout the devil in the wilderness, and constantly confound the religious leaders when they tried to trip him up with their questions. His early life may well have been the fairly conventional one of any Jewish boy of the time but as an adult Jesus was now beginning to challenge the conventions, it's little wonder that people began to say, 'He has gone out of his mind.' (Mk 3 v 21b). His family try to come to his rescue, were they perhaps more concerned by the fact that the crowds were now so large and insistent that he was unable to eat or rest properly than by what he was saying and doing?

The scribes go a step further and accuse Jesus of being possessed by the devil and that it was by his power that Jesus was able to cast out demons. They recognise that he has power but are unable to admit that it comes from God because that would put them dangerously close to saying that he is the Messiah. This is a relatively simple claim to counter, nothing that Jesus has done has caused harm or evil to anyone, to the contrary, Jesus has set people free from illnesses that have plagued them for years. He has spent time with outcasts giving them a sense of worth and often helping them to turn their lives around, this is not the way the devil works. If Jesus's power came from the devil then the devil would be working against himself, not a very likely scenario.

Let's step backwards in time to the beginning of our world and the events of the reading we heard from Genesis. Adam and Eve are trying to hide from God because they now have the knowledge of good and evil and have realised that they are naked. In her commentary on this passage

Christina Rees suggests that this is the point when free will is activated. Free will was always there of course otherwise Adam and Eve would not have been able to disobey God's instruction not to eat the fruit of that tree. Until that point they had simply accepted God's word, then along came that serpent sowing seeds of doubt and desire, and they made their choice. From that point onwards we have all had to make choices about our words and actions.

As humans we don't *have* to worship God, as Christians we have made the decision that God is worth our worship. We need to remember though, that worship isn't just turning up on Sunday, singing (or signing) a couple of hymns, joining in the liturgy, listening to someone ramble on about the Bible and receiving communion, it isn't even saying prayers each day and reading the Bible for yourself. All of those things are good and parts of worship but only part not the whole. Worship is an act of devotion, an expression of deep love that shows itself in the way we live our lives. If our actions don't match the words we say and sing then are we not the house divided against itself that Jesus warned about?

Returning to our gospel, when Jesus says, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' I don't think he's rejecting his own family, something I have heard in the past, to me he's using the moment to show that his family is anyone who follows God's will. The prophet Micah tells us

the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6 v 8

that is worship, using our free will to make the choices for good, to reject the stereotypes that I spoke of at the start, to spend time with the outcasts and marginalised in our society and help to change their lives, to do it because we love God and want to walk with him 'in the cool of the day' (Gen 3 v 8).