

*Preached by the Revd Dr Michael Piret, Dean of Divinity, on Sunday 7 June 2015, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.*

(Mark 3:20-35)

Over my years as Dean of Divinity, I've learned that complete strangers will sometimes write to you out of the blue, just because you have the title and are in this role. Unasked, people will send you free copies of expensive-looking books they've written (whether you wanted them or not). They'll write to you because of the prayers you've said in a broadcast evensong. Or maybe to object to a charity that you've chosen to benefit from Chapel collections. By far however, one of the most memorable random letters I've ever received came some years ago now, from a man in the north of England who wrote in a state of distress. I'd never met him, I don't know why he chose to write to me in particular – I suppose he just thought a Dean of Divinity was a suitable person to ask for advice. The letter was ever so carefully written, in clear and almost childlike handwriting on lined paper. His style and punctuation suggested he might never have got all that far in school; but he could certainly read his Bible. And at the heart of his problem were the words of Jesus that we just heard in today's Gospel. The letter said this:

Dear Sir. I am writing to you over a very real worry. You see I have sinned and blasphemed, against the holy ghost, and I am afraid that I will now go to hell, it say's in the bible that this sin shall not be forgiven .... [He went on about what the Bible said for several more lines, then he ended,] Would you please write back to me and let me know your opinion, as I would greatly appreciate it. [He signed off:] Yours most sincerely and worried.

In today's Gospel Jesus says something which is indeed unsettling. What is this passage getting at? I feel certain it would be incompatible with the rest of what Jesus teaches, incompatible with Christian faith, to say that the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world – all the sin of the world – oh, except one specific sin, for which God will punish transgressors forever. It reminds me of a prayer request that was posted on our little prayer board in the Antechapel a few years ago. Such an odd request that I saved it: it said, 'Pray for the souls of those who deserve Heaven but might still be condemned to Hell because of a technicality.' A technicality? If the Good News of Jesus Christ were about technicalities; if it were about technicalities and deserving Heaven, it would be *bad* news: every one of us would stand condemned. Remember, Jesus saved up his harshest criticism for officially pious people who thought religion was about technicalities.

So what do we make of this passage, the so-called unforgivable sin? – and it isn't really called that in the Gospel by the way. Well, as ever when we try to interpret Scripture, we'll fall into all kinds of nonsense if we don't start with the context of the verse or saying we're trying to interpret. Here that means considering what's been going on in Mark's Gospel so far. Jesus has been baptized by John and tested in the desert. He's begun his ministry and he has been healing people, and (to use the medical language of his time), casting out unclean spirits. He's healed a man in the synagogue at Capernaum; he's healed Peter's mother-in-law. As word gets around, great crowds all over Galilee come to him for healing. Moved with pity, he touches and heals a leper, then a paralytic man back in Capernaum. People from far and wide are following him. He keeps healing, showing he has authority to forgive sins, and getting himself in trouble with the Pharisees for healing on the Sabbath.

In today's Gospel all this continues: Jesus is being mobbed like a rock star, he's in a house where the crowd is so densely packed around him that nobody can even eat. His family are concerned: it's said he is 'beside himself' – out of his mind – they come to seize him and lead him away, but there's no question of turning back now. His ministry has focussed intensely on healing up to this point in Mark's Gospel: that's the context, and it's vital for us to notice if we're going to understand the hard words he is about to speak.

As we just heard, some Scribes from Jerusalem set themselves in opposition, making a claim about his miracles. They don't deny that the miracles are happening; their accusation is that they are manifestations of the powers of darkness. They say Jesus himself is possessed, so it is 'by the ruler of the demons that he casts out demons.' This is what brings Jesus to say those unsettling words: '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' (or to use a translation closer to Mark, 'does not *have* forgiveness') – 'but is guilty of an everlasting sin; *for they had said, He has an unclean spirit.*'

Those concluding words were to be left out of Matthew's and Luke's rendering of this scene, which is unfortunate. Because in Mark they fasten down securely the nature of the sin for which a person 'does not have forgiveness.' The Holy Spirit has descended on Jesus in Baptism and it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that he heals and saves. By the power of the Holy Spirit he has tied up the Adversary, the strong man, and it's by the Holy Spirit's power that Jesus is now, as he puts it, plundering Satan's property. As one commentator on Mark says, 'To call this Holy Spirit an *unclean* spirit is to call good, evil'<sup>1</sup> – it is to renounce, to demonize, to push away God's power to heal and save. We are, after all, free to do that.

But *eternal* sin, or *everlasting* sin? Is it possible for people to push away God's healing and saving power for ever? I don't know the answer to that. But my considered advice is that none of us tries to find out by experimentation. What we do know, is that if we reach out sincerely to God's healing and saving power, whatever sins and failures we may be guilty of, however we may have lost our way, God will receive us, like the father of the Prodigal Son who stands always ready and waiting to forgive. The son has only to come home, to find and receive the father's embrace. The great seventeenth-century priest and poet George Herbert, puts it beautifully:

'All may certainly conclude, that God loves them, till either they despise that Love, or despaire of his Mercy: not any sin else, but is within his Love; but the despising of Love must needs be without it. The thrusting away of his arme makes us onely not embraced.'<sup>2</sup> In the word order we would use now, nearly four hundred years after George Herbert, that is to say, Only the *thrusting away* of God's arm, makes us not embraced.

The despising and rejecting of God's saving love, is what we see in the Scribes in Mark chapter three. If to them, ultimate good is rejected as ultimate evil, they are themselves closing the door against it. And this isn't just about 'them' and 'us'; it's about humanity: we too share this capacity to reject the very grace of which everyone stands in need. It isn't about God withholding forgiveness. It's not about one blacklisted sin which because of a technicality cannot be forgiven. It's about the fact that sadly we can reject the healing and

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<sup>1</sup> John Fenton, *Finding the way through Mark* (London: Mowbray, 1995), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> George Herbert, 'A Priest to the Temple, or, The Countrey Parson,' in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 283.

saving power of the Spirit – and if we push away God’s embrace, as George Herbert says, we ‘must needs be without it.’

May this Eucharist, and every form of devotion in this Chapel, be one in which we say Yes to God’s love, God’s healing power and saving grace.

I hope my correspondent in the north of England didn’t despair of God’s mercy. He didn’t write back again after I replied. I ended my letter with these words - nothing original but derived one hundred per cent from a Gospel theme which all of us need to keep hearing and proclaiming:

‘Give thanks for his healing grace, accept it for what it is, and stop worrying! God loves you more than you can imagine.’