

How Satan Casts Out Satan

A sermon on Mark 3:20-35 by Nathan Nettleton, 7 June 2015

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The story we heard about Jesus from Mark's gospel tonight is one that has caused and continues to cause an enormous amount of trouble for many many Christians. It contained not one, but two, very confronting and unsettling statements. In fact maybe more, if you added in his portrayal of himself as a burglar, but I'll stick with two for tonight. Firstly, the Jesus who usually seems to recognise no limits to forgiveness and even forgives his own murderers as they kill him, says that there is something for which people can never have forgiveness. And there wouldn't be a pastor alive who hasn't had a distraught person come to them terrified that they have committed the unforgivable sin – the vague and undefined blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. And secondly, the same Jesus who is so often held up as the pin-up boy for traditional family values publicly snubs his mother and his siblings and relegates them to a place of lesser priority than his allegiance to those who follow God. This second one probably doesn't shock us as much as the original hearers, because we live in a society where many people have little to do with their families because the demands of work or new relationships have taken them far from the family neighbourhood, but in the kin-based village culture of first century Israel, the suggestion that ties of faith might take precedence over family ties was unheard of and utterly scandalous.

So let's try to put these statements back into their context, and see what they might be saying to us. This story comes quite early in the gospel as Mark tells it. We are only in the third chapter, but already Jesus is causing a stir. He has called his twelve disciples, he has done some preaching, he has healed quite a few sick people and cast out several demons, and the authorities already have their noses out of joint. He is not acting under their authority or doing things their way. And he seems to be so thoroughly heedless of the consequences that Mark tells us that his family begin to worry that he has gone mad and the religious authorities begin to accuse him of being under the influences of demons himself. Madness and demonic possession have often been confused with one another down through the years. So his mother and his brothers set out to pick him up and take him home, out of harm's way.

Now Mark does an interesting thing here, something he does numerous times in his telling of the stories of Jesus. He breaks from one story, tells another, and then comes back to finish the first one. And each time Mark does this it is clear that he is wanting us to hear the two stories as commentating on one another. So, before returning to Jesus's mother and brothers, we get the story of the religious experts from Jerusalem rejecting Jesus and his ministry as demonic. The reason he can cast out demons, they said, is because he is acting under the influence of an even more powerful demon, Beelzebul, the prince of the demons.

Now in today's world, we rarely use the language of demon possession to attack those who threaten us, but in every other respect, I put it to you that what we are seeing happen is this story is something that we see happening around us all the time. In fact, it is something that has been in the news quite a bit lately. Let me give you a couple of prominent examples.

Last weekend in the AFL football was designated "Indigenous Round", and there was a great focus on celebrating the contribution of indigenous footballers to the game and to our society. But in the midst of Indigenous Round, when Adam Goodes, the most high profile indigenous player, celebrated a goal by briefly performing an indigenous war dance towards the crowd

that was booing him, all manner of controversy broke out, and angry people were queuing up to condemn him. But the reasons people were so quick to pour scorn on him were the same reasons that large sectors of the crowds have been booing him for a couple of years. Adam Goodes is a bold and uncompromising indigenous man who does not accept the script that our society has written for indigenous people, and who rejects and exposes the self-serving myths we have built up to explain and excuse the racial divide in this country. For the most part, Australians are happy to celebrate the indigenous contribution, so long as the indigenous players appear suitably grateful for the opportunities “we” have given them to make their contribution to “our” game and “our” nation. But Adam Goodes is not going to sit meekly on the shelf that we have assigned to him. He has boldly used his profile in the game and the platform he had as “Australian of the Year” a couple of years back to push a much more confronting and challenging view of the place of indigenous people here. Like Jesus, he refuses to submit to the way things are or place himself subserviently under the authority of the dominant powers. And with both Jesus and Adam Goodes, when the dominant “us” feels its power and privilege questioned by such an upstart, it strikes back with great hostility. He has bitten the hand that feeds him, we say. He has rejected our culture and our values. He has lost the plot, lost perspective, and become an enemy of all that is good. So we demonise him and seek to boo him into submission.

In another recent news story, our Federal government is proposing to change the citizenship laws so that people who have become Australian citizens who are then involved with terrorist groups like the so-called Islamic State can be punished by being stripped of their Australian citizenship. The rhetoric from the Prime Minister is very clear. These people have rejected our culture and our values and turned against the things we hold dear, and so we must purge ourselves of them. We must take every measure we can to ensure that they are stripped of the perception that they are part of “us” and the privileges that come from being part of “us”. And while I don’t have much sympathy for those who join Islamic State, the fact that our instinctive demonising and rejection of them looks so similar to the ways we respond to even really good people like Adam Goodes and Jesus himself should at least call us to recognise how poor our judgment of good and evil is when others question and challenge our way of doing things. We have all too often shown ourselves just as capable to rejecting the very good as demonic and deserving to be purged from our midst.

So when they label him as demonic, Jesus responds with a riddle. “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.”

I have become increasingly convinced that we usually miss Jesus’s point here. We think he is defending himself by saying that it is stupid to think that Satan would ever try to cast out Satan, or that Satan’s realm would ever be divided against itself. But in fact, I think he is saying that that is precisely what does happen, all the time. The clue is in the last line when he says, “If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.” Satan cannot stand. His end has come. Which of course is precisely what Jesus *is* saying. Satan’s end has come. He cannot stand. And precisely because we are always seeking to respond to demonic powers with demonic powers. The game of labelling others as satanic and seeking to purge them from our midst is in fact the satanic game par excellence. The very name, the Satan, means the accuser. The social process of protecting ourselves by pointing the finger at others and accusing them of being the evil ones, the ones who must be rejected and

purged from our midst is a demonic process. It is satan casting out satan. Rather than face the truth that there is evil in all our hearts that needs to be brought to the light and forgiven and healed, we project our evil on to others and demonise them and expel them.

And where does this demonic game take us? What does it leave us with? It leaves us with a bitterly divided humanity spiralling deeper and deeper into a violent chaos. It leaves us with a humanity that is forever divided between good and bad, clean and unclean, lawful and unlawful, sinner and saint, name your own divides. The divisions run ever deeper and deeper and the responses of those who feel rejected and alienated become ever more violent and chaotic. And the ultimate end of this constant divisiveness is a house that cannot stand, a humanity falling apart. Our old way of trying to survive always involved dividing ourselves from the suspicious others and focussing only on the survival of our group. The terrorism-citizenship debate is this same old failed approach, trying to protect our group by purging it of those we see as threats.

They reject Jesus and accuse him of being demonic precisely because he is rejecting this old divisive method of protecting ourselves against perceived threats. Jesus's alternative way sees all of us, all of humanity, as just one group. Jesus's alternative culture does not define itself over and against those it rejects and expels, but instead seeks always to hold open the doorway of love and forgiveness and inclusion to all. In the kingdom or culture of God, there are no insiders and outsiders, just one big guest list on which all of us are named as those on the way in, by the generous love and mercy of God. Which of course appals and scandalises those who have set themselves up as the arbiters of good and evil, of who can be insiders and who must be demonised and expelled. No wonder they see what Jesus is doing and hear what he is saying and brand him as a demonic threat to the world as they know it.

Which perhaps gives us a clue as to why Jesus then suggests that this rejection is an unforgivable sin. Perhaps the unforgivable sin is unforgivable precisely because it is a rejection of forgiveness itself. You see, we hear what Jesus says and jump to the conclusion that he is saying God will never forgive this sin, but it doesn't actually say that at all. It just says that those who do this "can never have forgiveness." And in some ways it is just a statement of the bleeding obvious that those who utterly reject forgiveness cannot simultaneously embrace it and know themselves forgiven. If I reject food, I will starve to death, no matter how much food might be offered to me.

And with that, Mark returns us to the story he left off, and Jesus's mother and siblings turn up outside the house looking for him. And now we can hear what the gospel writer is saying when he reports that Jesus says, "Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." And we can also hear why Jesus's words shock and scandalise so many people. His refusal to validate or participate in our usual pattern of dividing ourselves up into rival groups of good and bad, "us" and "them," is so radical that he will not even recognise those most "sacred" of bonds, the ties of family and nation, as giving one in-group greater claim over his allegiance and support. It is so shocking that it is seen as anti-family and unpatriotic and demonic. But Jesus can see that it is always when we give our loyalty to some at the expense of others that we fan the flames of fear and hostility. Only when we recognise all the world as our brothers and sisters and mothers will the world be healed of its grievous wounds and love and mercy reign.

So now as we move on to pray for the world and to break bread around this table, let's resist the ultimately demonic temptation of praying for the blessing of "our people" and the punishment of "those people", and the demonic temptation to judge others as unworthy and exclude them from the fellowship of the Lord's Table. For the only things that Jesus rejects and excludes are rejection and exclusion themselves. He has shone the light of truth on our deeply entrenched culture of satan casting out satan, and called us all into one new worldwide family in which all of us, as forgiven and healed sinners are gathered as one another's brothers and sisters and mothers, for the glory of God and the life of the world.