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Introduction

Today we are back from our foray into John's Gospel and once again in the hands of Mark, the master storyteller. In this passage he skilfully weaves together a number of different stories hinging on contested narratives to show us something vital about the Kingdom of God – and thus about the identity of Jesus and the nature of his messiahship. They also give us some acute insights which we can use to reflect on our own lives and the conflicts we encounter.

Text

Mark 3:20-35

and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat.

When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind."

And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."

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.

But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

"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 had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

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."

Comment

Throughout his gospel Mark cleverly deploys different narrative techniques to direct the attention of his readers towards what he wants them to grasp. In this passage we are given a little nested group of intercalated stories which all help to interpret each other. In so doing they highlight the foundation stone which Mark wants to establish for the first explicit teaching about the Kingdom of God, which he is about to set out.

As we look we can see that there is a clear mirror pattern (also known as a chiasmic structure) to the verses:

v20: Jesus and the crowd

v21: Jesus' family

v22: Scribes

vv28f: Scribes

V 31–32: Jesus' family

vv34: Jesus and the crowd

Within this pattern are four different stories of conflict. Three of these are explicit: the conflict with family, the conflict with the scribes and, at the centre, the conflict with Satan. The other is not spelled out in the same obvious way but is one which runs through Mark's gospel and is the one which here sets the story in motion: the presence of the lakeside crowd (also, neatly, the most peripheral aspect of the nested set) and the fact that the scribes come 'down from Jerusalem' reminds us of the tension set out right at the inception of his gospel between the centre and the margins.

At the heart of each of these conflicts is a question about what constitutes good (or proper) order – and the battle is between different narratives about this. As we move through the interlocked stories, each deals with a different dimension and these in turn point us towards what lies at the heart of the chiasm – the contest between chaos and the order of God's kingdom. If we look at each in turn, and at the strategies used in contesting or affirming a particular narrative, these can give us some helpful lenses to then turn back onto our own lives and conflicts.

In the few verses prior to today's passage, with the dizzying speed so characteristic of Mark, Jesus has faced down the disapproval of the Pharisees and healed a man in the synagogue on the Sabbath, (thus setting in train the first of the conspiracies to bring him down); he has cured illnesses and cast out demons in a vast crowd on the lakeshore; and he has called a group together, taken them up a mountain and appointed twelve of them, authorising them for the work of the Kingdom. After this he returns to the lakeside where once again a large crowd gathers. These events continue the decentering which is one of Mark's major themes –namely that the Kingdom of God is not to be found in the places where religious or cultural narratives expect it to be located, but at the margins and amongst the poor and disreputable. They also set in train the next two conflicts in the story.

Firstly that between Jesus and his family unit – which we could see as a conflict about good social order. Jesus is operating in a culture in which this is located in acceptance of the established kinship structures. In providing identity, opportunity, responsibility etc, these were the basis of stability. Jesus' family are seemingly unable to accept what he is doing because he is operating outside of this approved narrative. Their solution is to try and remove him from the field of action – whether from fear for him or for themselves – before his actions bring about a breakdown of the accepted order. In the mirroring verses we see Jesus responding by offering an alternative narrative – one which locates identity and belonging in a different kind of network system operating within the kingdom of God.

Then we have the conflict between Jesus and the scribes about where power is located and legitimated. Jesus is operating outside the structures and control of the Temple establishment – gathering large crowds far from the approved centre of religious identity and authority. Representatives of that particular power narrative come down from that centre to see what is going on. and take action. It is not that they doubt that Jesus *has* power, it is that they see it as perverse and dangerous because it conflicts with theirs. The tactic they adopt to counter this is to undermine it: they attempt to delegitimise Jesus and what he is doing by ascribing the healings and exorcisms to satan. In the mirroring verse, Jesus offers the counter

narrative that the power inaugurating this new movement comes, not from satanic sources but from the Holy Spirit: the new community, in which order is differently understood, is being brought into being by the power of God.

At the heart of the chiasm, couched in a series of parables, is the thing to which Mark is ultimately directing us: a contested narrative about order in the world itself. Genesis begins with an account of how chaos is driven back and order, and an accompanying flourishing of life, is established under God. This divine order later becomes enshrined in the concept of *sh lôm* and the network of proper relationship – interpersonal, communal, national, and with the Divine itself – which allows all to flourish. So the stories which follow this beginning are – at personal and national level – also stories of the cosmic battle between these narratives of divine order and its freedoms, and chaos and its bondage to destruction (often overtly ascribed to rival heavenly powers). The arrival in the world of Jesus and his Kingdom, are the next chapter in this unfolding drama.

Firstly then Jesus points out the essential folly of the Scribal reasoning – how can he be engaged in the overthrow of bondage to chaos if he is *himself* in bondage to it? Then he drives home his point – far from being an agent of chaos, he is here in the service, and with the power, of God to liberate those in bondage to it, and to show them the path to *sh lômic* flourishing which is at the heart of the Divine narrative about the world. In the light of this, his subsequent reference to ‘unforgivable sin’ takes on a very particular nuance.

In rabbinic texts such sins were against God *and the sanctity of the community**: the scribes (and what they represent) are not just rejecting and denigrating the work of God but are opposing and trying to destroy the community and order that are its fruit. Moreover *aphesis* – the word translated in v.29 as ‘forgiveness’ – has the sense of being released from bondage. It seems as though Jesus is saying that the attitude underlying their narrative – the desire to preserve their own power base and prestige which leads them to traduce the Spirit in such a way – will prevent them from ever having the openness to God which will allow them to understand and enter into the life of this new community. Ironically it is they who are, and who will remain, in bondage to satan and destructive chaos.

Through this intercalation of stories, Mark thus sets up an important foundation stone for Jesus’ first explicit teaching about the Kingdom of God. It is also possible I think to see echoes of them in the parable of the sower which follows immediately: satan being easily able to snatch away some seed because it simply has no earth in which to fall seems to reference this interaction with the scribes; those whose hear the word and initially respond but are then choked by the thorns of competing narratives of the world have echoes of the conflict with the family unit. It is also no surprise that Mark has many stories which employ explicit language about the demonic – or that it is often demons, rather than people, who recognise and name Jesus. Even if we might struggle to accept these stories in a literal sense, we can understand them as illustrations of this central contested narrative about the world, and of how Mark understands – and wishes us to understand – the role of Jesus and the nature of his Kingdom.

These stories of contested narratives also offer us assorted starting points from which to reflect on a number of different potential dimensions of conflict:

What are the different narratives at work in a conflict situation and where are these in opposition, collusion, or synergy?

What is being seen as ‘proper order’ in a situation? In what units, structures, processes, or narratives is it located? Who or what power ‘legitimises’ or enforces it?

What particular tactics are being employed to impede, undermine, or delegitimize those involved in the situation? Am I guilty of any of them myself? Are there ways I can counter them and introduce more productive ways of engaging over the underlying issues?

*Jewish Annotated New Testament

Response

Reflect on a conflict situation in which you are, or have been, involved in the light of one or more of the above questions. Can you identify any of these dynamics or tactics? What might you do (or have done) differently or more energetically?

Alternatively take some time in the coming week to look at a conflict going on at national or international level and examine it in the light of the above passage and the questions raised. Can you see any of these dynamics or tactics at work? How can we become more aware of things like this when we read/hear about such conflicts, or see them on the news?

Prayer

Jesus
you were at the heart
of many contested narratives
about identity and purpose, legitimacy and authority;
help us to attend with more awareness
to the narratives at work in our lives –
both the ones which falsely constrain us,
and the ones we use to control others.
And as we see both with greater clarity
we may act more courageously
and with more humility and hospitality
that the good order of your Kingdom
may be established and advanced
Amen
