

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 10 Year B 2024

The gospel placed before us today might well be categorized under a heading: ‘Gospel texts containing uncomfortable elements.’ Or maybe, ‘Gospel texts with certain inconvenient truths’. Or even ‘Gospel texts we would prefer to overlook.’ To be sure, much – if not all - of the gospels can be categorized under such headings. At different times, different passages can move us and inspire us. But also convict us of sin, remind us of the gap between God and humanity, and highlight our profound need for God’s healing, redeeming, and transforming grace.

But the gospel text placed before us today hits us with three uncomfortable truths, three disconcerting elements. Firstly, we have the family of Jesus who come to him, thinking he is out of his mind, literally, ‘beside himself’. They seek to ‘restrain him’ (‘take charge’ of him). Perhaps they seek to drag him back to the carpenter’s shop in Nazareth. At this early stage of Mark’s Gospel (we are still just in Chapter 3), Jesus’ own family members misunderstand who is his and what he’s trying to do. At the end of the passage, Jesus apparently fails to acknowledge them and asks, *who are my mother and my brothers?* As one commentator has said on this passage, if you are looking for a gospel text in support of family life you won’t find it here.

Then after a heated exchange between Jesus and the scribes, we have mention of the unforgivable sin, of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The claim unsettles delicate Christian conscience. Isn’t Jesus supposed to be forgiving about everything? Can there really be a limit to God’s forgiveness? Well, here Jesus is indicating, yes, there is a limit. And just as Jesus’ own family misunderstands him, the scribes not only misunderstand him but accuse him of being possessed! He is not just ‘beside himself’. They accuse Jesus that it is *through the prince of devils that he cast out devils*. By simple logic Jesus disarms this accusation: *How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot last.*

But this little exchange *further* confronts us in our 21st-century sensibilities. It highlights a central aspect of Jesus’ ministry in the gospel of Mark: the casting out of demons. The gospel today helpfully provides us with a framework to make sense of this. The little parable Jesus uses to illustrate his point: *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*. Now, in this we are not meant to see Jesus as the burglar! But we *are* meant to see Jesus as the stronger man!

This incident is perhaps unsettling because, for most of us, depicts a reality we are unfamiliar with. And because it's strange and unfamiliar it is easy for us to dismiss it. But just because the gospel text reflects a reality unfamiliar to us doesn't mean something bigger and stranger than us isn't going on! Indeed, that a battle – *a spiritual battle* - is going on. We might like to imagine that most people experience life as we do. It is very easy for us from our position to imagine that for most people life is safe, calm, comfortable, and secure. But for many people that *is not* their experience. For many people something darker, sinister, and indeed evil is at work about them.

One example. When the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and his men arrived in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán in 1521, they described witnessing a grisly ceremony. Aztec priests, using razor-sharp obsidian blades, sliced open the chests of sacrificial victims and offered their still-beating hearts to their gods. Indeed, what the conquistadors stumbled across when they arrived in Mexico was an empire in which mass human sacrifice beggared belief. Now, we have largely scrubbed our awareness of this stuff, in service of an agenda that paints the Spanish as the evil exploiter of innocent native cultures. But the terrible Aztec customs are fully attested by the historical record. For sure, the toll brought by the Spanish to the native peoples of Central America was truly dreadful, mostly through the spreading of European diseases. But you don't have to think of the Spanish conquistadors as saints (they weren't!) to understand that they confronted evil so raw that it beggars imagination.

One recent author has described what the Spanish encountered: *“The Spaniards’ new residence was directly across from the spectacular pyramidal temple of the Hummingbird Wizard. The temple had been dedicated just thirty-two years earlier by the man regarded as the architect of the Aztec Empire, Tlacaelel. The highlight of the ceremony was the greatest human slaughter in the history of the Mexica - eighty thousand sacrificed, according to a sixteenth-century Aztec historian; the lines of those who would die stretched for miles, he recalled, and the killing went on without interruption for four days and nights. The Aztec nobility were provided with seats in boxes covered with rose blossoms intended to mask the smell of drying blood and rotting flesh.... The eighty-nine-year-old Tlacaelel remained the entire time, personally observing each and every sacrifice.”*

It's all based on contemporary historical accounts of both Spaniards and Aztecs – accounts that have been backed up by archaeological discoveries. Though many of the

conquistadors did become exploiters, there can be no doubt that Cortes came up against a kind of evil that would not be seen again until the 20th century, with the Holocaust. True, this doesn't exonerate the conquistadors of whatever evils they may have done. But then, whatever those evils may have been, they absolutely pale by comparison to the unfathomable evils from which the Spanish delivered the peoples of Mexico. We shouldn't be embarrassed to say so.

I quote: "*For Christians...it was for hundreds of years an article of faith that what Cortés and his men confronted at Tenochtitlan had been the Devil's own empire.*" Another writer reflecting on 15th-century Mexico: "*Nowhere else in human history has Satan so formalized and institutionalized his worship with so many of his own actual rites and symbols.*" Now, we moderns prefer to downplay or deny this raw evil because it suits our political ideology, or perhaps we are too afraid to confront it. Some might present it all as if some quaint historical anomaly, a little gory, but interesting anthropologically. We might seek to reframe the historical record or pretend it didn't really happen. But it did happen. Evil happens. Our avoidance of such things just goes to highlight the degree to which we have been desensitized to the reality of evil.

In terms of the gospel today, deliverance came to Aztecs by the stronger man Jesus coming to 'bind' the powers of evil. Now this idea is just about as politically incorrect as you can get. And I don't say it simply to be politically incorrect. I say it to simply relay an important – and simple – truth. There *are* powers of darkness at work in the world, powers that seek to bind us. Jesus Christ brings freedom and liberation. This is the very good news at the heart of Jesus' proclamation. 19th-century French poet Charles Baudelaire, said, "The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist." As people of faith, we make a grave misstep if we deny the reality of evil, and that a real spiritual battle is going on. We cannot properly proclaim the good news if we do not fully understand the world about us, including the unseen world about us.

For sure, the work of freedom and liberation is oftentimes misunderstood, for both Jesus and the Church. The gospel itself reflects this. Both Jesus' own family and the religious authorities misunderstand him. It is surely *confusing* the Spirit of God who brings life, freedom, and hope with the spirit of oppression, captivity and death that is the ultimate blasphemy. A condition so drastic that *persistence* in this error can only be understood as unforgivable. But if we place our trust in the Strong One (indeed, *the Stronger One*) then *we can* boldly confront all the powers which seek to bind us. Amen.