

## MARK 3:20-35 ST JOHN'S, 10.6.18, 9.30 am

### INTRODUCTION

Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet... a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless . . . Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea . . . A relatively close vote at that.<sup>1</sup>

This quote from The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown, echoes a widely held view of Jesus within C21 Western society. People are very happy to acknowledge that Jesus was a brilliant man, whose moral teaching was enlightened. But they have trouble accepting that he performed miracles, that he rose from the dead, or that he made any claim to be more than a man. We'll come back to that at the end of this talk, once we've seen how wrong such claims really are.

### MAD, BAD OR GOD?

No-one who actually encountered Jesus ever suggested that he was just another religious teacher or prophet. In the passage we've just heard, there are three different views of Jesus during the early days of his ministry. Up to this point in Jesus' story, Mark's written about Jesus calling people to follow him, healing lots of sick people, casting out demons, and preaching and teaching. Back in Nazareth, Jesus' family have heard about all this, but when they hear that he's become so popular that he isn't even getting time to eat, they decide it's all gone too far. *He is out of his mind*, and needs rescuing, they think (vv 20-21).

The second view of Jesus' early ministry that we read of here is far more hostile. Jesus has been taking Galilee by storm. It's all too much for the local religious leaders, so they've called in the heavyweights from Jerusalem! These *scribes who came down from Jerusalem* accuse Jesus of being in league with the Devil himself. Their charge against Jesus is that *by the prince of demons he casts out the demons* (v 22).

So, is Jesus either mad or bad? We don't have to look any further than this passage to see that he's neither, although of course the rest of the gospels confirm that conclusion. If Jesus was mad, he wouldn't have been able to refute the criticisms against him so forcefully. No madman would have shown the simple common-sense of verse 26: *if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end*.

And Jesus is equally clearly not bad. He's been casting demons out and healing people – hardly the actions of someone obeying the orders of Satan!

So Jesus is neither mad nor bad. Neither is he simply another teacher, another prophet. He claims here that he's able to cast out demons because he's stronger than Satan. He claims a unique relationship with God, such that *whoever does the will of God, he (or she) is my brother and sister and mother* (v 35). The rest of the gospels are full of Jesus' claims that he is God in human form: he claims the authority to forgive sins, he accepts worship, he addresses God as *Abba, Father*,

he displays authority over the wind and waves, over demons and diseases, and even over life itself. This is no mere prophet; this is no madman; this is not the devil incarnate. This man is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Word made flesh, the Saviour of the world.

So let's think about the people who make these different responses to Jesus in this passage:

### **JESUS' FAMILY**

At the beginning of this passage, Jesus' family *went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He's out of his mind."*

These are the people who know Jesus the best. Up until a couple of months previously, he shared his whole life with them. They're struggling to make sense of all that's been happening since Jesus left home and started his public ministry. And it's embarrassing for them! In a few short weeks, Jesus has already rocked the establishment so violently that teachers of the Law have travelled from Jerusalem to check him out! Jesus' mother and brothers want to save him, and themselves, from the consequences of recent events. If they can only take him home to Nazareth, surely, eventually, he'll settle down again, to the quiet life of a carpenter?

But Jesus' family aren't the only people historically to have considered him mad. Henry Havelock Ellis, an English doctor, sexual psychologist and social reformer, wrote in 1914: 'Had there been a lunatic asylum in the suburbs of Jerusalem, Jesus Christ would infallibly have been shut up in it at the outset of his public career.'<sup>2</sup>

Jesus' family did eventually come to a very different conclusion about him. Later in the NT, and in other early Christian records, we learn that most, if not all, of them came to accept him as Lord and Saviour. Jesus' brother James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. They changed their minds as they learned to see Jesus, not as a familiar member of their family, but as someone with unique authority and power, who really did have the right to command worship and obedience.

### **THE TEACHERS OF THE LAW**

The *scribes who came down from Jerusalem* neither accused Jesus of being mad, nor denied that he'd been driving out demons. Their response is far more hostile: they accuse him of being *possessed by Beelzebul* (v 22). In other words, they deliberately call the good things that Jesus has done – driving out demons and healing people of *various diseases* (1:34) – evil. One writer says, 'they were attributing the glorious and manifest work of God to the power of evil'.<sup>3</sup> Jesus replies with the most serious warning: *whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin* (v 29). If we resist the Lord to the extent that we deliberately and knowingly attribute his good works to the devil, we risk eternal condemnation. The good news is that aside from this, *all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter* (v 28)!

### **THE DISCIPLES**

The last group of people to think about here is the disciples, along with the crowds who have come to hear Jesus teaching. Jesus has come

to call people to *repent and believe in the gospel* (1:15). The people who've responded to his call, at least initially, are those who are *sitting around* Jesus (v 32). These are people who are doing *the will of God* (v 35). They don't consider Jesus to be mad, and they're not accusing him of being demon-possessed. They recognise that he has amazing authority, both in his teaching, and in his power to drive out demons (1:22, 27). They want to know more, and so they've crowded round him to hear him speak. Jesus commends them, and goes so far as to tell them that they are his true family.

## CONCLUSION

The attempt to write Jesus off as nothing more than a mortal prophet, a brilliant man, whose moral teaching was enlightened, is a modern idea which holds no water if we take the gospels seriously. As I'm sure you've heard me quote before, C S Lewis puts it like this:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about [Jesus Christ]: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But

let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is still calling people to *repent and believe in the gospel*. The incredible thing is, that if we do that, if we seek to do *the will of God*, Jesus calls us *my brother and sister!* He left his blood relatives standing on the doorstep, while he called those who were following him his true family. We have that same privilege, the same close relationship, if we acknowledge that Jesus is neither mad, nor bad; if we fall on our knees and call him Lord and God, and seek to live in obedience to his teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, pp 232-3

<sup>2</sup> Henry Havelock Ellis, *Impressions and Comments, Series 3*, 1914

<sup>3</sup> R T France, *The People's Bible Commentary: Mark*, (Oxford, BRF, 1996), p 47)

<sup>4</sup> C S Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (Glasgow, Collins, 1952; Fount Paperback edition, 1977), p 52