**Mark 3: 20-end**

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

So here we are: just into the third chapter of Mark and already Jesus has got the crowds wondering about him, his family afraid for him (and maybe of him!), and the religious leaders gunning for him. And all he’s done so far is announce the coming kingdom of God, call a few disciples, cast out a demon or two, and heal a bunch of sick people.

Of course, one of those disciples was a tax collector, he cast out the demon and did much of his healing work on the Sabbath, and he wasn’t put off in the least when a leper approached him. Which means that his vision of the coming kingdom of God was rooted in deep inclusivity that would let neither religious law nor social custom prevent him from reaching those in need of the life he came to offer.

And when you commit yourself to offering that kind of unimaginable grace and hospitality, you’re bound to encounter some flak.

If we rewind to this week’s first reading from Genesis we get the story of Adam and Eve, and original sin. Which seems more like original insecurity. Sort of a form of fear. (hold that thought)

So, in the Genesis story, Adam and Eve fall victim to the tempter’s suggestion, first, that God is keeping things from them and, second, that they don’t actually need God but can know good and evil (a short hand for knowing all things) on their own. And so they take matters into their own hands. Significantly, as this bit of the story shows, cutting the ties with God doesn’t help. Indeed, their insecurity only grows and before they know it they find themselves alienated from God, each other, creation itself.

In the Gospel, we see a similar dynamic playing out in that all these different parties – the crowds, the religious authorities, even his own family – are judging him against existing social and religious rules/norms. That’s one way we keep our insecurities at bay: by creating rules – so, almost by definition, those rules we create are ones that help us rather than our neighbour. They are designed to make us feel better and suit our cause. They make us feel safer.

And if we stop and think about it, lots of stuff – advertising for example – is designed to keep us afraid. Afraid that we won’t be cool, afraid that we won’t be liked, afraid that we won’t do the right things, buy the right things, be seen with the right people. If you don’t want to be afraid, buy our clothes, our car, our healthy (in inverted commas) foods….. Fear is one of the strongest motivators there is. Advertisers and politicians push our fear buttons all the time. Because if they can just get us to be afraid, they’ve got us in their mesh.

And there’s a bit of a danger that this gospel text we’ve just heard might be used to do exactly that–make us afraid. The commentaries weren’t much help. One called this passage: One of the most problematic and misused texts in the Gospels. And suddenly not only am I afraid of this text, I’m afraid to preach on it. Because I don’t want to be the next one to misuse this text in a sermon.

But then I remembered that one of the commonest phrases in Scripture is: Do not be afraid. So do I really think that Jesus wants to overwhelm us with fear? No, I don’t believe I do.

But then there’s that part about unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit: Truly I tell you, says Jesus, 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. Which is the perfect tool for creating fear and getting people to buy into the church’s message of salvation. We’re always being told that God forgives sin, but then we are confronted with Jesus saying: Yeah, but there is this one sin… And suddenly, we are all very afraid and we want to know what it is and how we make sure that we don’t commit it.

And suddenly, fear is alive and well among us. And then our whole image of God becomes one of fear. So in order to refute that, we have to go back a bit. Up until this point in chapter three, Jesus has proclaimed that the kingdom of God is near; that it’s coming to this place. And to demonstrate what the world looks like when the kingdom of God comes, he has a meal with some people, he cast out a demon or two, he heals a bunch of sick people, and he forgives a man’s sins.

But the thing is: the meal he ate was with sinners and tax collectors – which meant he was hanging out with the wrong crowd. The kind of people your parents would rather you didn’t mix with. And that demon he cast out and the healing he did was all done on the Sabbath, which was against religious law. And the sins he forgave? Apparently he had no authority to do that. You can’t just go round the streets forgiving sins, Jesus. We have a whole process in place and a temple for that sort of thing.

What we learn is that when Jesus shows up, bringing in the kingdom of God, he does so precisely by breaking all the rules. By stripping away the social and religious barriers that divide us into insiders and outsiders. Good people and bad people. Members of the club and riff raff. When Jesus brings about the kingdom of God, he breaks the rules in order to extend God’s love out into the world. Would we be willing to break rules in order to do that?

No wonder people tried to stop Jesus. He was threatening their whole way of life. And their religious institution – which they firmly believed was on God’s team. But Jesus’ actions were calling that all into question. Could God’s love and healing and forgiveness and welcome really be doled out as freely and broadly as Jesus seemed to think. No wonder really that the people were hacked off with him: he was busy redefining all their safe boundaries.

So Jesus is busy extending God’s love to everyone, and both his family and the religious authorities are telling him enough is enough. His family say he is out of his mind. And the religious authorities say he’s possessed by Satan. And then Jesus uses their own logic against them in the form of a parable. You think I’m possessed by Satan? But I cast out demons. How can Satan cast out Satan? That bit about the strong man just means evil, or Satan or whatever you want to use to mean the badness in the world. In fact, I’m the very one, he says, who ties **up** Satan and takes back all the things Satan has held hostage. And how does Jesus do that? By forgiving all those who are held captive by sin, whether or not they deserve it.  By healing the sick on the Sabbath day, even though religious law condemns it. By eating a meal with those no one else wants to sit beside.

There **will be** forgiveness, he says, whether you like it or not. You can’t stop God’s love from being spread out into the world. But if you can’t see that what I am doing **is** from God, is extending God’s love in the world, then…. that’s the worst sin of all. A sin against the very Spirit of God, who is Love. And how will you ever know God’s grace and forgiveness if you can’t even recognize it in the work I am doing…

The sin against the Holy Spirit that he is talking about is just believing that Jesus’ work is evil or mad. But his intention is not to scare them or threaten them with eternal damnation – he’s trying to shake them awake, into the understanding that this is really important stuff. To open their eyes to the fact that the work of God goes way beyond their narrow religious rules.

And so then he tries a different way: he makes the concept of family really big. Jesus’ family members come to the door to take him home, and the crowd around him tells him that his family is outside waiting. And Jesus looks around and says: You are all my family. That doesn’t mean he is rejecting the people at the door; just moving the goalposts to include all people. Which is after all God’s definition of family. Every congregation I have ever known thinks they are friendly. But what difference does it make if we truly see each other as family? Remember, you can choose your friends but you can’t choose your family……

And it is as family that we gather round God’s table to share his feast.

**Amen**