

**Sermon for First Sunday after Trinity at 10am Parish Eucharist at St Mary's Barnes on 6 June 2021  
preached by Sister Margaret Anne ASSP**

Now that we are beyond Eastertide and into what the Church calls in its liturgical calendar "ordinary time" we are Sunday by Sunday following the gospel of Mark in this Year B of the lectionary. Occasionally we will have gospel readings from John, but by and large in the coming Sundays it is passages from Mark's gospel that we will hear read to us in the next few months. St Mark the Evangelist has usually been identified with John Mark whose mother's house in Jerusalem was a meeting-place for the Apostles, and he has also been identified with the young man described in Mark chapter 14 verse 51, who followed Christ after his arrest and managed to escape capture. John Mark was a Jew, and according to Paul's letter to the Colossians a cousin to Barnabas. He was later the companion of both Paul and Peter. Scholars generally regard the shortest gospel ascribed to Mark as the earliest, and that it was most likely written while he was in Rome. The gospel may have been based as much on Peter's preaching as on Mark's own memory. Mark's gospel has a sharpness and immediacy about it, and it emphasises the disciples' weaknesses and their lack of understanding that Jesus would suffer for the world's salvation. Mark's gospel is clear in its message that following Christ will mean the giving up of the self in ways that are sacrificial.

The gospel passage that we have heard read today from the third chapter of Mark is a difficult one. Yet it is clearly significant. All three synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke record this story, albeit in altered forms as regards details. In Mark's version our gospel passage today comes immediately after Jesus has appointed the twelve apostles. In this parable of Jesus and Beelzebul we are given four groups of people in their response to Jesus. There are Jesus' close companions. There are the crowds who come in great numbers to hear Jesus. There are Jesus' family, who have heard reports that Jesus has gone out of his mind, and the family seem to believe such reports. And there are the scribes from Jerusalem, who claim that Jesus is not so much mad as bad. They declare that Jesus has Beelzebul, a chief demon. Jesus goes on to disprove such a disparaging claim by, as usual, telling a parable. How can Satan cast out Satan? If Jesus is curing people of their diseases, such works cannot be of the evil one. The hallmark of evil is division, whereas Jesus' ministry and mission is to make people whole. The healings are evidence of that and speak for themselves. Jesus rebuts false accusations from the scribes with openness and truth-telling. The scribes attack his authority. This is at the root of their bitter onslaughts on Jesus. Jesus is proving to be a highly successful public figure, and they don't like it, because it calls into question their own authority, or lack of it.

In 1995 the Committee on Standards in Public Life set up by the then government and chaired by Lord Nolan published in their report Seven Principles of Public Life, which became known as the Nolan Principles. The seven principles apply to all aspects of public life, and are set out for the benefit of all who serve the public in any way. The seven principles are:

- Selflessness
- Integrity
- Objectivity
- Accountability
- Openness
- Honesty
- Leadership

In his dealings with people, and perhaps most especially with those who oppose him, Jesus displays these principles to perfection. He unfailingly speaks with openness and challenges falsehood repeatedly with open statements of the truth, whether directly or in the form of parables.

The most difficult part of our gospel today is when Jesus states that whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness. This is clearly aimed at his opponents, the scribes who want to turn truth into falsehood, white into black, and who are set on reversing and destroying all that Jesus stands for. Jesus even gives his immediate family a hard time. He states that his true family are those who are listening to him and who do the will of God. Here Jesus anticipates the new Christian community who will, after his death and resurrection, witness to the truth of Jesus, that he is the Son of God.

I would like here to mention the doctrine of Universalism. It is the doctrine that God's salvation is for all and that ultimately all people will know the experience of God's unending bliss in heaven. So the notion of hell, however we think of it – and indeed it is possible to experience a hell of the mind in this earthly life – is merely a temporary phenomenon. In the end all intelligent beings will enjoy salvation. This doctrine, which was expounded by the biblical theologian Origen in the third century, is a Christian doctrine, but it is not mainstream Christian doctrine. Many Christians will admit to a hope that all intelligent beings will one day be caught up into a state of eternal bliss in the life after death, but fewer Christians will explicitly state it as part of their belief system. The biblical beginnings of a movement towards universalist thinking can be seen even in some Old Testament writings of the later prophets, such as Isaiah Chapter 40 onwards and Jonah, both of which contain anti-nationalist teaching. That is, God's loving and saving purposes were directed towards not just Israel and Judah but also towards other nations as well.

The positive aspect of Universalism is that it gives hope. It maintains that even those most set against truth are not beyond the scope of God's love. That difficult verse in today's gospel about blaspheming against the Holy Spirit and not receiving forgiveness can be set in this context of hope. It can be dangerous to take a single verse of scripture and take it out of context and give it a skewed interpretation. It is clear from the gospels as a whole that Jesus' message was very much about love and forgiveness. He hated hypocrisy, but he felt it was worth his while to challenge those who opposed him, because he wanted them to change.

In our first reading from Genesis today we have that familiar story of Adam and Eve and their fall from grace through their disobedience. After they have eaten the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God calls to Adam: "Where are you?" This myth-like story with its universal themes of good and evil is as relevant to us today as it was when it was first written. That question "Where are you?" is a question for all of us. Where are you? Where are we? Do we stand for truth and love and justice, or do we shirk our responsibilities like Adam and slink away into the shadows? Do we really stand for the values of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed, most notably selfless love? It is on the living out of such values that we shall be judged: judged, that is, thankfully, by a most merciful God.

