

Texts: I Samuel 8:4-20 & Mark 3:20-35

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Introduction

The composition of Mark 3:21-35 is a “sandwich,” a favourite Markan technique of beginning one story, interrupting it with another, and then returning to the original plot.

This narrative structure establishes a relationship between the two episodes:

- A** 3:20f: Jesus’ family comes to “get” him
- B** 3:22-30: scribes come to “get” Jesus
- A** 3:31-34: Jesus’ family summons him again

Clearly Mark recognises that the two pillars of communal authority, the family or clan and the State, work together to domesticate people under the status quo.

Let us pray...

*May the words of my mouth
meditations of all of our hearts
you,
our redeemer.*

*and the
be acceptable to
O God, our strength and
Amen*

A young pastor was struggling
to make ends meet
at his first placement
and trying to be very frugal about
how his family spent their money.

One day he came home
to find a \$750 receipt
for a dress his wife purchased at Myers.

He was beside himself
and confronted her saying,
"How could you do this?
Paid \$750 for a dress!"

"Well," his wife confessed,
"I was standing outside the store
looking at the dress in the window,
and suddenly, without even realizing it,
I found myself trying it on and buying it.
It was like Satan was whispering in my ear,
'You look fabulous in that dress.
You have to get it!'"

Enraged, the pastor grumbled,
"You know what the Bible says about
dealing with temptation.
You have to say, 'Get behind me, Satan!'"

"Well, I did that," replied his wife,
"But then Satan said, '

It looks fabulous from back here, too!"

In Mark 3:20-35 we read about
Beelzebul, demons, Satan,
the strong man, blasphemy,
the unforgivable sin,
and 'who are my mother and brothers?'

The gospel reading for this morning
Mark 3:20-35 is filled with cosmic,
metaphysical, and apocalyptic imagery
that has incited anxiety, frustration,
and wild speculation for
generations of Christians.

However, despite all
the other-worldly language,
this is a 'down to earth' story
about a human family in crisis —
a household divided.

*31 Then his mother and his brothers came;
and standing outside, they sent to him and called him.*

*32 A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him,
"Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside,
asking for you."*

*33 And he replied, "**Who are my mother and my brothers?**"*

*34 And looking at those who sat around him, he said,
"Here are my mother and my brothers!"*

35 Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

(Mark 3:31-35)

Truth be told, some people might find this passage difficult or uncomfortable.

It appears that Jesus was denying or disowning his family, his relatives.

"Who are my mother and my brothers?"

"Here are my mother and my brothers!"

³⁵ Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Some of you might have heard of Ched Myers.

He is a biblical Scholar and Justice Activist.

He came to Australia in 1995 and run some workshops.

He wrote an excellent commentary on the Gospel of Mark in 1988 using a multidisciplinary approach, called "socio-literary method".

Myers integrates literary criticism, socio-historical exegesis, and political hermeneutics in his investigation of Mark – the oldest story of Jesus – as "manifesto of radical discipleship."

The title of the commentary is
"BINDING THE STRONG MAN:
A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus".

Clearly the title is based on
the Gospel reading for today.

According to Ched Myers:

"We might well be sympathetic with their intent to silence Jesus; for surely to them it was lunacy for a marked man to continue to provoke the highest authorities in the land. He was courting disaster, and they wished to protect him – as well as their family reputation. Such is the real anxiety of those related to political dissidents."

In the ancient Mediterranean world
the kinship system determined
personhood and identity,
controlled vocational prospects,
and facilitated overall socialization.

Jesus' family sought to reign him in
no doubt for his own protection
as well as for the sake of their reputation.

Mark underlines this tension spatially:
contrary to what we would expect,
the disciples and the crowd
are "inside" the home,
while the family is "outside" (3:32).

There is nothing in Mark's Jesus
to support idealised Christian polemic
about the relatively recent invention of the 'nuclear family'.

Kinship structures tend to be motivated towards status quo, conformity, and control.

Tribalism and nationalism are larger-scale versions of the same underlying dynamic.

For Jesus, however, the social control mechanisms of traditional kinship structures are likely to be an impediment to the radical call of the good news: Jesus' 'nuclear family' wants to restrain him.

For Jesus, the true 'family' is not kinship – nor any other kind of tribal-nationalistic identity.

Jesus understands that in order to weave an alternative social fabric, the most basic conventions and constraints of kinship must be questioned: "*Who are my mother and my brothers?*" (3:32).

Alliance to kinship structures – whether nuclear family or any other form of tribalism – can stand in the way of allegiance to the kingdom of God, the new humanity which transcends all the old kinship and tribal structures.

Mark's gospel could hardly be clearer.

So the pressing question for us is:
how Christianity has managed
to turn Jesus' teaching on its head –
insisting on allegiance to kinship
and 'nuclear family' values
being more important than
allegiance to Jesus' and his kin-dom.

How did the church
reverse Jesus' radical teaching:
and make Jesus into
a 'meek and mild' mascot
for an unreal and idealised 'nuclear family'?

Let's be clear
Jesus defied the norms about
who's in and who's out.

People possessed by demons
and those who were maimed
or born with a physical limitation or defect
were often assumed to be cursed,
to be not natural,
or to have sinned
or to be suffering from
the sins of their parents.

Jesus forgives and heals all
who are in need- no exceptions!

If people weren't sure about this before,
Jesus pushed his point unbelievably
and quite literally home
when he says that anyone
and everyone who does the work of God
is his true brother and sister and mother.

He revised what constitutes a family
at a time when family was everything.

NOW turning to Jesus'
second head-on collision:
his no-holds-barred assault
on the religious - political establishment.

In his travels around the Galilee
since leaving his Nazareth hometown,
Jesus has already violated their rules
and crossed the occasional sword with them.

Mark's picture is crystal clear:
the religious-political establishment
have come down from Jerusalem
to deal with a threat
to their claim as the ruling elite.

The scribes from Jerusalem are
effectively government investigators
from the capital,
ready to press charges.

Clearly the accusation that

his casting out of demons
is by the power of Satan
is a desperate tactic.

Here we see the age-old war of myths:
the attempt to identify
one's perceived enemy
in satanic terms,
as the 'axis of evil'.

Psychologically,
we would call this the projection
of their unacknowledged shadow.

Jesus' response amounts
to the declaration of an ideological war
with the scribal establishment:
"No one can enter the strong man's house
and plunder his property without
first tying up the strong man;
then indeed the house can be plundered".

In Mark's gospel,
Jesus is the one who will break into
the bankrupt house of
the scribal-political establishment.

Bind the 'strong man'
and plunder the house.

In I Samuel 8:4-20
we have the story of Samuel

and the demand for a king.

Samuel's leadership has been weak,
and has left a vacuum,
begging to be filled.

But instead of digging deeper
into their heritage and faith,
the people of God are overcome
by their jealousy of other nations.

And they beg for the simpler,
the autocratic, answer.

*"...we are determined to have a king over us," they say,
"so that we also may be like other nations,
and that our king may govern us
and go out before us and fight our battles."*

In asking for a king,
to have what everyone else has,
they are not only saying
that GOD isn't enough,
but that they don't want GOD
as their king.

They want a person, tangible,
with them, to be their king.

In his book, *For All God's Worth*,
the theologian NT Wright writes,
*"left to myself, the god I want is a god
who will give me what I want."*

He—or more likely it —
will be a projection of my desires.
At the grosser level,
this will lead me to one of
the more obvious pagan gods or goddesses,
who offer their devotees money or sex or power
(as Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche pointed out).
All idols start out life as the god somebody wanted”

The elders of Israel gathered together
and went to Samuel at Ramah to demand
a king to govern them,
like all the other nations.

The people of God wanted a substitute!

The people of God wanted a strong man.

When the nations of the world
are wrought by fear, anxiety,
panic, economic insecurity,
they often turn to what
political scientists call,
“the strong man.”

The “strong man” is not always
physically strong or a man,
instead a “strong man” is
an autocratic leader who rules by force
and runs an authoritarian
or totalitarian regime.

After the devastation of WWI
people of turned to strong men
like Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini.

In our current age of economic instability,
the world has once again
turned to strong men
like Vladimir Putin in Russia,
Viktor Orban in Hungary,
Rodrigo Duterte in Philippines,
Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey,
Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela,
and the list goes on and on.

Power corrupts,
and absolute power corrupts absolutely,
which means the possibility for evil
is a clear and present danger.

If there's anything we can learn
from the Bible and history
it is that as tempting as it is
to turn to them times of crisis,
the strong man will never save us.
Instead, they often become
the promoters of evil.

However, the consistent refrain
from Jesus, Paul, Peter and others,
is that we cannot fight evil with evil.

Pitting evil against evil

simply creates more evil.

Opposing a strong man with more evil,
only reproduces more evil.

As Martin Luther King said,
"The ultimate weakness of violence is
that it is a descending spiral,
begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.
Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it.
Through violence you may murder the liar,
but you cannot murder the lie,
nor establish the truth.
Through violence you murder the hater,
but you do not murder hate.
In fact, violence merely increases hate...
Returning violence for violence multiplies violence,
adding deeper darkness to a night
already devoid of stars.
Darkness cannot drive out darkness;
only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate;
only love can do that."

And evil cannot drive out evil,
only goodness and mercy can do that.

To defeat evil and liberate people
from its possession, Jesus said,
we must tie it up —
seize it, secure it,
confine it, bind it,

restrict it, and limit its power
so it cannot possess us —
otherwise we will be overcome by evil
before we can liberate others
from its power.

Truth be told the thing I'm struggling with
a lot these days is how not to 'hate'
and feel rage toward those in power
and those who don't view
the justice issues as I do.

I find it difficult to live in
such a polarized world,
because I seem to have
a knee-jerk reaction
when any issue comes up.

The question for those of us
who follow Jesus
is how do we defeat evil?

I believe we need to be courageous
and urgently commit ourselves
to be the alternative to evil.

That doesn't mean we must be nice.

Jesus certainly wasn't "nice"
to his family or the scribes.

It also doesn't mean

we have to be or polite,
civil, silent, or neutral.

Jesus was none of those things.

As followers of Jesus,
we are not called to
be nice, silent,
polite, civil, or neutral
in the face of evil;
we are called to be brave,
truthful, loving, righteous,
and good.

The Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, once said,
"Wherever human beings
endure suffering and humiliation
we must take sides.
Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim.

Silence encourages the tormentor,
never the tormented.
Sometimes we must interfere.

When human lives are endangered,
when human dignity is in jeopardy,
or national borders and sensitivities
become irrelevant.

Wherever men and women are persecuted
because of their race, religion, or political views,
that place must become the centre of the universe.

What victims need above all is
to know they are not alone;
that we are not forgetting them,
that when their voices are stifled
we will lend them ours...
that the quality of our freedom depends on theirs."

Friends when the problems in our world
seem monstrous and overwhelming.

Our tendency is to imagine
we must do big and momentous things
to affect systemic change in the world.

But throughout history,
whenever the principalities
and rules of the world
were looming large
and exercising enormous oppressive power —
God would start with something small;
a tiny seemingly insignificant
act of love and goodness
that would grow up to stand tall
in the face of evil.

When evil goes big —
God goes small by calling a couple
to leave their country,
by inspiring the courage of two midwives in Egypt,
by sparking the dream of a young boy in Canaan,
by finding the faith of a twelve year old girl in Nazareth,

by breathing the Spirit on small group of disciples in Jerusalem, by
emboldening a tent maker in Rome,
by creating a new household
and a new family that is not defined
by patriarchy, biology,
ethnicity, or money,
but where our brothers, sisters, and mothers
are those who fulfill God's desire
for justice, peace, and love.

Remember God does not call us
to do great things,
but small things with great love.

The true house of God—
the inverse kin-dom of God,
Jesus said, is like a mustard seed.

The smallest seed
with the biggest reach —
tiny acts of kindness,
once planted and cultivated,
can grow up to take over the whole garden.
The birth of something seemingly insignificant
that becomes a brand-new creation.

So, as we stand today,
Whenever we face a large and powerful evil
that feels overwhelming,
we need not dehumanize others
or feel paralysed,
or shrink underneath

the shadow of the challenge
before us.

Instead we are simply called,
as John Wesley said, to
"Do all the good we can,
by all the means we can,
in all the ways we can,
in all the places we can,
at all the times we can,
to all the people we can,
as long as ever we can."

And that, my friends,
with God is always enough.

Amen.