

Talk for 1st Sunday after Trinity, Ordinary Time: 6th June

by Ian Totterdell, Churchwarden

Mark's Gospel is fast-paced, with Jesus's ministry underway by verse 14 of the first chapter! By the time we get to today's passage, 20 verses into chapter 3, Jesus has healed many, including a leper and a paralysed man, appointed the twelve apostles and taught multitudes about God's love and forgiveness. He is attracting huge crowds, probably for a range of reasons: some for healing (for themselves or a loved one), some to hear the teaching, and some just to see what all the fuss was about. But Jesus has also angered the Jewish religious authorities, both the scribes and the Pharisees, by forgiving the sins of the paralysed man (something only God could do) and not requiring that his disciples observe the strict Sabbath regulations. Here we see them fighting back, but the argument they use to try to turn the crowds away from Jesus and towards them is not a good one.

Jesus easily demolishes their claim that he is working on behalf of Satan when he heals the sick and teaches about God's love and forgiveness - it just makes no sense! (Is that really the best they can come up with?) But he also warns of a more serious problem: they seem to be willing to say that day is night in their wish to discredit and oppose him, just because he is not acting in exactly the way they think he should. Maybe it is they who are promoting the Devil by opposing God's work, and they risk cutting themselves off from accepting the forgiveness God offers.

Jesus's family also seem to be an impediment to his ministry, but in a more subtle and nuanced way. The hordes of people going to see him, so many that Jesus and his closest disciples could not even find space to eat, must have seemed like a circus, and they would have had well-founded fears for his safety - both from the risk of crushing and from the potential response of the Jewish or the Roman authorities. (John the Baptist's arrest will have been fresh in their minds; and of course the authorities' response did eventually lead to Jesus's death.) But they might also have been worried about the reputation of the family and the damage critical comments could have ("Look at what happened to that Jesus, I always said there was something wrong about him, it's his mother I feel sorry for..."). So they set out "to restrain him" as the passage puts it. Although they will have had some real concern for his well-being, they seem not to consider the evidence that as he heals and teaches Jesus is doing exactly what God wants him to do - a fault the scribes also share.

Should we be so critical, though? There would have been many instances at that time, and many since (including in recent decades), when charismatic preachers have attracted huge uncritical followings; unfortunately they have been either misguided or driven by selfish and evil motives, "very naughty boys" rather than messiahs, and have led their followers to ruin and sometimes death. How can we guard against being led astray by a charlatan but still be open to God working powerfully but unconventionally through an individual or a church?

I don't think the answer involves anything particularly new: remaining close to God through prayer and reading the bible, looking at the evidence with a critical but open mind, discussing things with Christian sisters and brothers - and being open to God's Holy Spirit shaking things up, including in our lives and our church. I suspect that I have a tendency towards wanting and expecting things to go on as they have done in the recent past, and need God to push me quite hard to go for something new in my faith; but my experience of being pushed in that way has always been exciting and positive (in the long run, at least). As we consider our "4 Rs" (Return, Retain, Resist, Renewal) perhaps this is a good moment to consider what new things God is doing in the St Thomas community, and how we can help (possibly by joining others in things they are already doing, maybe secular things). And we can rejoice that by doing the will of God we will be showing we are Jesus's "brother and sister and mother."