

# “Whoever does the will of God ...

*... is my brother, my sister, and my mother*

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*A sermon given on the Second Sunday of Trinity, 9th June 2024, by the Mission Priest, the Revd Eileen Connolly, in Beverley Minster*

*Genesis 3:8-15; Mark 3:20-end*

I wonder how easy it is for you to keep a secret. I think in my role, it should be fairly easy, but I have two daughters, and they cannot keep a secret. I've lost count of the number of times where one of them has come to me and they're twins, and says, I shouldn't tell you this, mum, but there's a surprise happening. I said, I don't want to know about the surprise. I don't want to know about your secrets. But they cannot resist telling me.

Now, in Mark's gospel, Mark is hiding a secret, and this secret is initially known only to him and to the reader, but not to those in the Gospels, in the stories. This secret is about the identity of the main character, Jesus. This man is actually the Messiah, the one who has been sent from God, the one who is God, and the one who was foretold to come and save the people of Israel. In the other Gospels, Matthew starts straight away with 'this is the genealogy of Jesus, the Messiah.' No such a secret there. In Luke, Mary is told the secret that you will give birth to the Son of God. In John, straightway, he starts, 'Jesus is the word. The word was with God.'

In Mark's gospel, this Messianic secret was blind to most people - except for one group. In an earlier chapter in Mark, Jesus enters the synagogue and a man with an unclean spirit cries out, "*What have you got to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy one of God.*" But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "*Be silent and come out of him.*" So the demons or the unclean spirits or the dark forces, those spiritual beings who are opposed to the Kingdom of God knew the identity of Jesus. And yet such was the power and authority of Jesus that he commanded that they were silent, and they were.

Now, back to the reading in Mark. This was at the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, and he was creating quite a stir: he was healing people; he was releasing them from demonic oppression; he was speaking with authority; he was challenging the religious laws and rulers on all sorts of things, and the crowd piled in - anyone who had any need for healing wanted to touch this man. You would think that there would be great excitement by the people who were the church of the time and maybe by Jesus's family. But imagine if it happened on the Saturday market that we had Jesus and he was able to heal. There'd be quite a storm, I would imagine. You would have thought that his family was proud and that the religious people who knew God would be excited. And yet they were the ones who seemed to be trying to block him in this reading. They were the ones who were accusing him of being out of his mind. They were the ones, the Scribes and Pharisees, said he was possessed by Beelzebub, which literally means the 'Lord of the Flies'. They were probably doing it for the right reason, but they were being used by Satan to block the work of God. And so Jesus spoke really sternly, especially to his families, didn't he? He said, "*Who are my brother and my mother and my sisters?*" And he looked around him at all the needy people, all the sick, the disabled, the demon possessed, those people who knew that they needed a saviour. And he said, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, and my mother."

So Jesus here is calling his followers, those who do God's will, into a new kind of relationship, a relationship that is stronger than the family bonds that often tire. I don't know how you feel about that- it could be good news; it could be bad news. Jesus wasn't saying that once you become a Christian, then you should ignore your family (honour your father and mother - and at the cross, he said [of his own mother] to John, "Here is your mother.") - He was saying that when you become a follower of Jesus your loyalties change, and primarily they become what God wants for us. And that in the pursuit of the will of God, we need each other, we need to support each other - this is the church, in harmony with one another and the spirit of God. We need each other because being a Christian and doing the will of God is not an easy lifestyle choice. Because when we say 'yes' to Jesus in our lives, we are choosing to walk a radically alternative way to the way of our society and Jesus said he was the way, the truth and the life. And just as there was always opposition to Jesus, if we seek to follow in his way, we too will experience opposition. And sometimes it may well come from our families, and sometimes it may well come from the church.

Let's now go back to the first reading in Genesis. It's the famous account of how as humans, we fell from relationship with God. Now, whether you think this is a literal account or whether you think it is a myth, faith or allegory, there are things that we can learn from it about God and about mankind. The first thing that I think from this is that God is fundamentally relational. In the passage, it says that God was looking for Adam and Eve as he walked in the garden at the time of the evening breeze. God wanted to be with Adam and Eve. Now, Satan, the serpent in this account, represents those things which deceive us into believing that wrong is good and that good is bad. When Adam and Eve fall prey to this deception and realise they have made the wrong choice, what do they do? They run and hide. (Have you ever hidden because you have done something you know is wrong? Have you ever hidden from God?) When they finally have to come clean to God, what else do they do? The man blames the woman. How typical is that? The woman blames the serpent. No one takes responsibility. What was the effect? The effect was a breakdown in trust and relationship between God and humanity and between humans - this is what is known as 'The Fall.'

Now, all this talk about Satan and demons, you might be thinking, what has this got to do with my life today? But are these powerful forces in opposition to God and goodness not seen in our world today? What about racism, which tells us to believe that one group of people is superior to another simply because of their skin colour or cultural heritage. What about patriarchalism, which tells us that men have the right to dominate women who are seen as possession. What about materialism? The lie that tells us that if we have enough money and possessions, we will have life and happiness. What about militarism? The belief that weapons and wars bring us peace and security and cause us to kill one another, often in the name of God.

When Jesus was going about healing and setting people free. He was accused by the scribes of being possessed by demons. Yet Jesus came to overpower the darkness, to be the light, to set people free, to release captives from prisons, the prisons that we find ourselves in all too well. He did this by binding the strong man - the strong man being the Prince of this World who rules this world and affects our lives today. And Jesus's victory is seen in his death and his resurrection. And this Jesus, whom the demons and unclean spirits had to obey, still has power and authority today. He still comes to set us free from the things that we are held captive to - whether that's fear or shame or unbelief or unforgiveness or racism - whatever binds us and keeps us from that relationship with God. He calls us into a new family to be sisters and

brothers in Christ. And as we are set free, we are then called to set others free by doing the same work that Jesus did.

One of the questions that God asked in Adam and Eve's story was when he was walking in the garden, he says, "Where are you?" Where are you? He knew where they were. But perhaps today is asking the same question of you, 'Where are you? Where are you with me? Are you held in captivity? Do you know me? Where are you? Because I want to know you and you to know me.' Maybe you are walking with the Lord in the garden. Maybe you have walked with him before, but you are not walking with him now. Maybe you have never walked with him, but the invitation is to come, to come and to take that first step on that journey with God. Jesus says, 'We will work this out together - just come.' Because he loves us; he accepts us in spite of our faults and failings and past mistakes; he wants to set us free, and his invitation is for all of us today and every day.

# Reading Texts

## Genesis 3:8-15

<sup>8</sup> They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. <sup>9</sup> But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' <sup>10</sup> He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' <sup>11</sup> He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' <sup>12</sup> The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' <sup>13</sup> Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.' <sup>14</sup> The Lord God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. <sup>15</sup> I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.'

## Mark 3:20-end

<sup>20</sup> and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. <sup>21</sup> When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.' <sup>22</sup> And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.' <sup>23</sup> And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, 'How can Satan cast out Satan? <sup>24</sup> If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. <sup>25</sup> And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. <sup>26</sup> And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. <sup>27</sup> But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. <sup>28</sup> 'Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; <sup>29</sup> but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin'- <sup>30</sup> for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.' <sup>31</sup> Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. <sup>32</sup> A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' <sup>33</sup> And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' <sup>34</sup> And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup> Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'