

## A bit of a problem...

Mark 3:20-35

The Pharisees of Jesus' day had a bit of a problem. Like many of the others at the time, one part of this problem was they wanted to get rid of the Roman oppression. The theory of how to do this varied just as much between the different groups. The Zealots thought they should fight, like the Maccabean revolt two hundred years before. The Herodians decided that collaboration was the best option. If you can't get rid of them because they are too powerful, the next best thing will be to use their power to advance your own interests. Unlike these two groups, the Pharisees came up with a religious response: when the whole of Israel keeps the whole of the Torah for a single day, then Yahweh will come and intervene.

Which brings us to their second problem...

The Pharisees of Jesus' day had a bit of a problem. There was this itinerant teacher wandering around the countryside doing things they would have usually said was evidence of God's favour and the common, uneducated people, were flocking to him. Well, that wasn't the problem. The problem was he DIDN'T KEEP THE SABBATH!!! And there were various other laws he seemed to ignore, like not touching people who were unclean. How was the whole of Israel going to keep the whole Torah for a single day when this popular preacher said things like "the Sabbath was made for people, and not people for the Sabbath."?

And so something had to be done...

There was obviously only one way that a teacher could lead people away from God. After all, that was what was happening when he was challenging how to keep the Torah (or at least their interpretation of the Torah, which had to have been the correct one). The only reason he was doing this, the only reason he was able to keep up with such a bruising schedule was not because he was passionate about what he did, was not because he felt intensely called by God to do this. No, the reason simply had to be that he was possessed. This would allow step one of doing "something": discrediting him.

In essence, saying that Jesus could do what he did was because of a demon, was a fairly simple way of discrediting an opponent in those days. People believed in demons and saw signs of mental illness as signs of evil working in lives. Thankfully today we understand a lot more about mental illness and how to treat it, which has reduced the associated stigma.

However, back in Jesus' day the two ideas were conflated and it created an accusation that could destroy an individual's credibility.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day had a bit of a problem. It was not the problems they thought they had – how to get rid of the Romans and how to undermine the teacher who taught people to think about the relevance of (and hence how to apply) the Torah. The problem the author of this Gospel identifies is that they did not recognise God's work when it was happening before them. They did not recognise this because they were too sure about what it would look like with all their rules and regulations dictating how people live a life pleasing to God. They did not recognise God working in Jesus because he didn't keep the Torah in the way they expected.

Did Jesus keep the *intent* of the Torah? Absolutely. Did he keep the strict interpretation of it that was put forth by the leadership of the day? Absolutely not. Jesus had been brought up as a faithful Jew – at least according to the other Gospels.

It is interesting this anecdote is sandwiched between a story about the reactions of his family – a technique the author uses to tell us something more about this story. This is a story that is often misused by cults to separate people from their families and therefore it must be read with an understanding of the wider context.

There are many positive stories in this Gospel, and the others, about Jesus and his family, but only this one where he turns away from them to say his followers are his family, not the people with whom he grew up. It is not that Jesus is rejecting his family, but rather the first readers of this Gospel would have been rejected by their families. The Christian community became their new family.

This all raises some important questions. When do we fail to recognise God's work because it doesn't come in nice, neat packages we are expecting? It can be easy to see the face of Christ in the people "like us" but what about others? Do we see the face of Christ as we walk past a homeless person, or with the person struggling to learn English? What about transgendered youth who have been rejected by their families? Can we accept them as they are – the beloved of God?

As we reflect on creating a welcoming community, what are the ways that we are like the Pharisees? In what ways do we need to challenge ourselves to extend our understanding and be welcoming to all people, as Jesus did.