

Christ in Conflict

An Exposition of Mark chapter 3

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Shriveled hand or stubborn heart? (vv 1-6)

This chapter begins, as the previous one ends, with a dispute about the Sabbath: but now the confrontation is becoming more acrimonious and the issues are seen to be more fundamental. "Them" in v 2 refers back to the Pharisees of chapter 1: they were trying to find fault with Jesus and saw an opportunity in the sick man. According to most rabbis, even fairly lenient ones, healing was only permitted on the Sabbath if the sufferer was in extreme danger. Jesus knew that this was an appalling travesty of the Scriptures: Isaiah 58 shows clearly that God expects holy days (fasts and Sabbaths) to be used for acts of goodness and mercy. Jesus fulfils that expectation. As he does so we see three stark contrasts between him and the Pharisees. These contrasts demonstrate the growing conflict and clarify the issues at stake.

The first contrast, in vv 2 and 3, is between the stealth of the Pharisees and the openness of Jesus. They watch him closely, expecting that if he does anything it will be very quick or even secretive. They expect the same behaviour of him as they themselves exhibit. But Jesus does not act in underhand or deceitful ways. He insists that the sick man stand up in front of the whole congregation.

Everyone is to be confronted with the choice between good and evil, healing and not healing. Everyone, willing or not, is to be made a witness of Jesus' act of mercy. Jesus forces this first contrast out into the open.

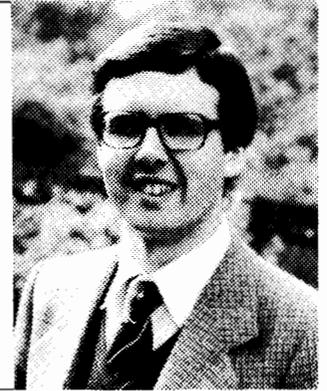
The second contrast, in v 4, is even more stark: to do good, saving life, or to do evil and kill. Once again Jesus is the one who brings the issue into the open. The Pharisees, in secret, are looking for a capital charge against Jesus: but he knows their thoughts (Luke 6:8). So his question is not merely rhetorical, neither is it an exaggeration of the matter. He is not asking whether he should do good in healing or evil in killing. He is asking them to judge between him, with his desire to do good on the Sabbath, and themselves, with their Sabbath-day conspiracy to put him to death. The Pharisees remain silent because there is no answer they can give. He has exposed their evil and shown them that he sees it and that God's law condemns it.

The third contrast, in vv 5 and 6, completes this terrible picture: it sets Jesus' anger against that of the Pharisees. Jesus is indeed angry, and justly so. But we note the significance of the Greek tenses: his anger, or at least his angry look, was short-lived, but his deep distress at their stubbornness was long-lasting. His anger and distress do not, however, warp his behaviour: it is in that condition that he performs the creative miracle of healing. He does not do it to prove his power, for nobody is in any doubt about that. He does it because it is good, worthy of God's Sabbath. But the Pharisees' anger produces a different result: they determine to kill Jesus, to turn their conspiracy into reality, even at the cost of co-operating with the ungodly followers of Herod who they despised and hated so much.

Righteous anger leads on to righteous action, but anger against God leads to action against God.

This opening section of the chapter is not, at its deepest level, about the Sabbath or a healing miracle: it contrasts for us Jesus, open in his behaviour, intent on doing good, even showing mercy in his anger and distress; and the

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Pharisees, secretive as if ashamed, refusing to choose good, and going out in their anger to co-operate with evil men in an evil deed. Jesus is confronting the powers of darkness at their most terrible and Mark is showing us the contrast between him and them.

Unruly crowds and unclean spirits

Jesus could rarely get away from the crowds or from the evil spirits: both were stirred up in his presence. His reputation had spread far and wide, and the throng must have been immense and chaotic. Yet Jesus does not shun them. Why the trip to the lake? Partly at least because it was an ideal spot for teaching and ministering to the crowd without being overwhelmed by their physical presence and particularly by their desire for healing. On this occasion he tells the disciples to get a boat ready for him in case he needs it to get far enough away to teach unhindered. We are not told whether he actually used the boat or not, merely that he had it prepared. It is worth noticing that Jesus, on more than one occasion, took thoughtful precautions against possible eventualities. He did not leave everything to last-minute inspiration. He did not expect God to help him out of situations he could have avoided. So here he is, facing the crowds and (as we shall see) the spirits, are ready for them.

But his readiness was not to do what they wanted or expected: he knew his purposes and even the intimidation of the multitudes did not cause him to swerve from them. We can only assume that the boat was intended for teaching, as at the beginning of the next chapter: we saw the priority of preaching and teaching over other human contacts, even over healing, in Mark 1.35-39. Yet the crowd had very definite expectations of Jesus. They wanted physical healing, and did not want to have to listen carefully and patiently to even the most inspired preaching. It is not clear from v 10 whether he did heal any on this occasion: that is not the most important thing to Mark. In this the author is closely reflecting Jesus' own priorities: he was ready to heal and he often did so, but he wanted to be known as teacher rather than healer and he did not want his healing ministry to crowd out the ultimately more important work of preaching. So it is that on several occasions he warned those he had healed not to broadcast the fact: perverse men would be bound to misunderstand or even to try to change his priorities.

Jesus' priorities included a sense of timing, so we see also a similar warning to the evil spirits: they have recognised

him as the Son of God, but he orders them to keep this knowledge to themselves. Again Mark is not concerned with whether or not Jesus drove these evil spirits out of those they had possessed: perhaps that is taken for granted, but certainly it is of secondary importance. What really matters is that Jesus was not yet ready to be acknowledged publicly. Even in Mark 8.27-38, when Peter came to see and profess the truth, Jesus gave the disciples strict orders not to tell it openly: he had first to teach them the real nature of messiahship and he had to die and be raised before the gospel could be proclaimed. It was no good announcing that the Messiah had come before the people had seen what the Messiah and his ministry were really all about. The spirits apparently expected Jesus to go public: perhaps they too had underestimated the need for teaching, preaching, and suffering before Jesus could be properly acknowledged.

The crowds and the spirits had misunderstood Jesus. To be known as the healer, or the one before whom spirits trembled, was not his primary aim at this stage in his ministry. First of all the Jewish people had to be taught, and the evils within their perverted religion had to be exposed and confronted. And yet, because of who he was, he did exercise real authority over sickness, over the crowds, and over the unclean spirits. He stuck to his priorities and put his opponents, and those who wanted him to deviate from his course, firmly in their place.

Authority for apostles (vv 13-19)

In this section Jesus demonstrates his authority in a number of ways, and delegates some of that authority to his apostles. We see his authority over the crowds down by the lake, in that he leaves them there and goes into the hills with just a few; his authority over himself, in that he knew the needs of the crowds but resolved on a long-term policy of help for them rather than the immediate measures which would have brought him so much acclaim; his authority to choose a few out of the many to be his associates and his ambassadors; his authority to give them power over demons; his authority to give new names to his people (and we must remember here the great importance attached to names in the Bible); and his authority to replace God's disobedient and defiant Israel with an Israel, again under twelve leaders, called to submit to and to share in that remarkable authority. This paragraph of Mark is not in parentheses, and it is not merely another list of names to be taught in Sunday schools. It marks the beginning of something radically new: Israel has rejected and rebelled against its God and its Messiah (v 6), and Jesus exercises his authority to reject and replace Israel.

But even the re-formed Israel (we should not call it "new": Scripture does not and such an idea implies too great a discontinuity between the two Testaments) is far from being perfectly obedient. Jesus recognised this, and Mark wants us to notice it from the very outset. So we are told (v 19) that one of those chosen by Jesus became his betrayer. Judas was given the same authority and status as the others, but decided to misuse it. There is no guarantee of indefectibility for the reformed people of God or for its leaders. Each individual, and the body as a whole, is empowered and expected to submit to the Christ. Simple observation tells us that not all do so. Christians, and the Church, cannot take their status and security for granted.

Confusion, confrontation, condemnation (vv 20-30)

Again we see here Jesus' own people misunderstanding him and the religious leaders rejecting him with terrifying finality. Jesus responds to the former with an assurance of the possibility of forgiveness and to the latter with an equally terrifying and final sentence of death.

Jesus' return from the isolation of the hills seems to be courting more trouble from the crowds, and it certainly makes life very inconvenient for him and his disciples. Why did he come back? Presumably because he knew he still had to teach and to confront the forces of evil. Although the crowds made things so difficult for him, it was them he had come to serve.

But his own people, on realising that he could not even eat because of the crowds, decided to save him from what they diagnosed as his religious mania. They may have been his family or his friends: either is a possible reading of the original, and v 31, in which his real family arrives, fits in with either interpretation. It is enough to regard these as Jesus' own people. They were not against his ministry, but were well-meaning and had what they considered his best interests at heart. We do not see Jesus' direct response to them: Mark seems concerned to contrast their confusion about Jesus with the contempt in which the scribes held him. But v 28 seem to be Jesus' answer to those who reject him briefly out of ignorance: they can be forgiven such sin and blasphemy.

The legal experts from Jerusalem were possibly an official delegation from the Sanhedrin: they did not merely misunderstand Jesus but rejected him totally. They were not concerned for his welfare, or appreciative of the good he had been doing. They ascribed his authority over demons to the prince of demons. Mark records one of Jesus' refutations of their foolishness: if Satan is opposing himself he is doomed (Matthew 12.27-28 and Luke 11.19-20 include another refutation which shows that the scribes are criticising their own Jewish exorcists). After the refutation comes an assertion by Jesus that he is able to plunder Satan's possessions because he has real authority over him: he has bound him and can therefore rob his house. Only after this comes the difficult passage about the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. But it is not really difficult when we see it as Jesus' response to these hardhearted scribes.

Jesus insists that all sins and blasphemies of men can be forgiven: that is the essential context for our understanding of the "eternal sin", although it in no way makes the blasphemy against the Spirit less real or less serious. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is explained in v 30: it is a settled, continuous, public denunciation of Jesus as working for evil and not for good. It is associated with a hardness of heart which makes repentance impossible: but that hardness may be God's doing, his irreversible sentence of death. We see this with Pharaoh in three consecutive and chilling verses, Exodus 9.34-10.1. First Pharaoh hardens his heart, then we are told that his heart was hard or hardened, and finally the LORD says "I have hardened his heart." Paul, in Romans 1.24, 26, 28 writes of God "giving men over" to their sinful natures and desires. That is precisely what Jesus is doing here (and what he authorises the twelve to do in Mark 6.11).

Jesus will not allow men to think they have any number of chances to repent, or that they can wait until their deathbed: the fact is that a heart set against him will naturally become harder and that after a time repentance will become impossible. Judgement begins, and the sentence is sometimes passed, in this life.

Every sin can be forgiven, but persistent defiance of God and his Christ precludes forgiveness. This is therefore a warning to all who hear it not to settle into hardness against Christ: such settled sinfulness condemns itself.

Jesus' authority is once again at the heart of this section of the chapter. He has authority over demons because he has bound Satan. He has authority to condemn for eternity
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In Isaiah 38 we read of Hezekiah's prayer when he was very ill and how he declared, "For the grave cannot praise Thee, death cannot celebrate Thee: they that go down to the pit cannot hope for Thy truth. The living, the living he shall praise Thee, as I do this day ..." Hezekiah's illness was a Divine chastisement for his pride and self-sufficiency. He saw it as the evidence of God's deep displeasure. He faced death imminently because of his sin. It is this fact that makes death not merely unwelcome, but the occasion of fear. Will he not thus be cut off from God? These facts must be borne in mind in understanding why he anticipates death with foreboding and alarm and uses expressions such as these.

A further point that must be stressed is well put by John Laidlaw: "We are fairly entitled to distinguish in the Old Testament between the ideas of an after-life current in the age of the writers, and the revealed hopes to which they clung. Natural or traditional notions of *She'ol* as a gloomy subterranean abode, with its weak and wavering shades, its almost entire extinction of existence, may colour the thoughts of a psalmist (or a king) under the cloud of spiritual depression ... may be dramatically presented in the poetry of Job, but these writers themselves teach us to distinguish these from the truth of revelation, and attach all their own hopes of a future life to the

revealed doctrines of man's creation and redemption." (*The Bible Doctrine of Man*, p.331).

The word *She'ol* does need to be handled carefully. It is a neutral term, indicating in itself neither happiness nor misery. Frequently it means the grave, or death in the broad sense, the state of death. In this sense the righteous and the wicked alike go to *She'ol*. In a number of places it does seem to denote the destination of the wicked beyond death. Descent into *She'ol* is set forth as a punishment against the wicked. So Psalm 9:7, "The wicked shall be turned back unto *She'ol*, even all the nations that forget God."

The Old Testament, then, teaches from first to last that life in the immediate presence of God was the destiny of every true child of God before the advent of Christ. David's words are an adequate and typical expression: "In Thy presence is fulness of joy; at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore." (Psalm 16:11).

John Watte's article on Life After Death in the Old Testament is an abridged version of a paper presented at a study day organised by the ministers' training panel of the Grace Assembly. The full text is being published in Still Reforming, the theological Bulletin of the Grace Assembly. Copies of Still Reforming are obtainable from Mr R. J. Cooke, 5 Swiss Avenue, Watford, WD1 7LL.

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those who choose to defy him. And he has authority to choose the time of confrontation and of judgement: the scribes thought they were condemning him, but he turned their condemnation against them. His authority is absolute.

True family (vv 31-35)

In these final verses of the chapter Jesus takes to himself authority to redefine even the closest of human relationships, to reconstitute the family. It may have been his mother and brothers who thought he was going mad in v 21: we cannot be certain. But we can be certain that his brothers did not yet believe in him (John 7:5), though Mary may well have done. We must be careful here to note what is not recorded. Mark does not say that Jesus refused to see his family, or that he disowned them as family: merely that he owned as family "whoever does God's will." In this context doing God's will simply means listening to Jesus' teaching: these people have not yet had any opportunity to go out and obey him, but they are prepared to sit at his feet and so acknowledge his authority. The family of God consists of those who submit to Christ.

Although Jesus does not here deny his human family we must take this passage alongside others in which he speaks about family loyalty and obligations. He is under no doubt of the duty to provide for parents (Mark 7:9-13) and for children (Matthew 7:9-11). He made provision for his mother to be cared for after his death (John 19:26-27), although he ensured that it would be in the household of a believer rather than that of any of her sons or other relatives. And he taught that devotion to him must be greater than to any other person, including family (Matthew 10:37; Luke 14:26). He insists on love and loyalty within the human family: but nothing must come before love and loyalty to himself, and to those who belong to him.

Authority defied, doubted, displayed (vv 1-35)

We are now in a position to see the main themes and thrust of the whole chapter. It is clear that Jesus' authority is the heart of the matter: Jesus and Mark both make this plain. And in the chapter we see, as part of the cumulative picture of the first eight chapters of Mark's Gospel, that authority defied, doubted and displayed.

Jesus' authority is defied by the Pharisees (and with them by the Herodians) and by the scribes. These groups represent the religious, political and theological leadership of Israel; Jesus clearly considers that they represent Israel as a whole, and he sets about convening a reformed and obedient Israel around himself.

It is ironic that the evil spirits were not really any problem to Jesus: the only effective opposition to him came from the leaders of God's own people.

Evil itself bows down before him and eventually acknowledges defeat at his hands. But defiant hearts within the people of God, especially among the leadership, are the real obstacle and opposition to his person and his work. Is there a lesson here for the Church throughout the ages, and not least the Church of our own day?

Jesus' authority is doubted by the crowds, who think they know best what they need: healing rather than teaching. It is doubted by his own people, who think he is going mad when his work begins to involve personal sacrifices. It is even doubted by members of his own family, who are not among his closest followers. In short it is doubted by those close to him, those who listen to him, those who love with him. This is not the picture we are often led to imagine, of a Jesus who convinced at least the common people with ease. These people wanted Jesus to be what he was not, to have different priorities. If they did not actually reject him they must have come close to doing so at times. Is this not a picture of the membership and fringe membership of his Church in every generation, including our own?

Jesus' authority is displayed most clearly in the priorities which he sets himself and stuck to. He determined to do good, even though it involved exposing, confronting and condemning evil. He determined to preach, even though it meant that such activities as healing had to take second place. He determined to re-establish the people of God, even though that was bound to cause great offence to the physical seed of the Patriarchs, (and has continued to cause such offence ever since). In short he determined to obey God rather than man: and he insisted on similar obedience from his followers, his true family. And does not the obedience he expects of his people today include an acceptance of his priorities?