

Mark 3:20-35 Sermon for 11am

My favourite Christmas film is Miracle on 34th Street. In it, a really nice old man claims he is Santa Claus and goes around doing really good things which tend to conflict with the needs of the businesses employing him. He ends up on trial for telling off a fake Santa Claus for being drunk and the courtroom is the climax of the film where it becomes a trial about whether he is the real Santa Claus or not. There are the lawyers in the courtroom, failing to grasp his claim and trying to show that he is a fraud and therefore a dangerously insane old man. There are others who try to remove him from the situation for his own good, believing that he's a bit mad, but generally harmless and could be better being looked after privately. Then finally, there's the rest of the city who are congregating around the courtroom holding up banners and chanting "We Believe!" If you want to know how it ends, you'll have to watch – I'm not going to spoil it for you.

I mention it because it's almost identical to the situation in our gospel reading this morning. We have Jesus surrounded by crowds of people, all desperate to see him, to be healed and to hear what he has to say. But we also have his, presumably well-meaning family who are concerned about Jesus' sanity, and also the scribes, the people who knew their Jewish scriptures, who considered him dangerous. No-one in the story is sitting on the fence; everyone has an opinion about Jesus. There's no middle ground.

In some ways, this is a sad story. For Jesus, the two sets of people who you'd hope would most recognise him and follow him were those who knew him best, his family, and those who knew their Jewish scriptures best, the scribes. Jesus came as the one who fulfilled prophetic predictions and so should have been recognised by those who most familiar with the prophecies. Jesus came as a baby who grew, developed, learned and became a man, and so having watched this development, surely his family would see there was something different about him. So it's a sad tale of rejection or misunderstanding from those best placed to get it right.

For those interested in a bit of technical biblical theology, we have here what's called a "Markan sandwich" where the gospel writer, Mark, sandwiches one story inside another: the story of Jesus' family coming to take him away contains the filling of the rejection of Jesus by the scribes and Jesus's defence of himself. It's something you'll see lots of in Mark's gospel, so I mention it just in passing so you'll understand if you see it again.

Jesus has been teaching and healing the crowd and has returned to a house, and the crowd have followed. Jesus and his disciples are unable to find time to even eat, because of the crowd's demands. Jesus's family are concerned that what began so innocently as their slightly eccentrically zealous son was now becoming something seriously problematic and embarrassing. He was obviously losing a grip on reality they thought and so they did the only kind thing they could; they tried to save him from himself by taking him away from the crowd. They thought he had gone very sadly mad.

Meanwhile, the scribes weren't being so kindly in their treatment of Jesus. They described him as Beelzebul, the old name for the prince of demons in Canaan, the area they lived in. They claimed that Jesus' healings and exorcisms were really powered by malevolent intent and therefore Jesus wasn't just mad as his family supposed – instead he was dangerous and evil. Jesus' response to them is equally unbending. Maybe he refers to the past when he talks about divided kingdoms failing; recalling that the Jewish history is littered with division, civil war and eventually becoming puppet states, just as they were then - a conquered part of the Roman empire. Any power that

works against itself must fall. Instead, Jesus says, to plunder a house you must first deal with the strong man who guards it. Rather than being in league with evil in whichever name is used to describe it, Jesus comes as the person who binds and shackles malevolence so that the treasure of the house – in this passage, all those people who are held by the darkness of evil – can be set free. This is Jesus' explanation for what he's been doing when he's been healing people and casting out demons from them in the previous passages – he's been a liberating force, freeing people from their darkness and despair.

Starkly, for Jesus, the worst thing anyone can do is to see these great liberating works of God's power and declare them dark and evil. To do that would take a special brand of twistedness which is hard to forget.

And so, we have the scribes with their twisted accusation receiving a cutting rebuke from Jesus. They should have known better. They should have recognised him, but they didn't. They dismissed him as dangerous.

And immediately Jesus' family arrive on the scene. Maybe they couldn't get to him through the crowd or maybe they didn't want to be seen with this embarrassing madman. In any case they sent a message through the crowd calling him home. If you've ever watched any films where someone claims to be sane when everyone else thinks they are mad, you'll be familiar with how useless it is to argue the case – you inevitably come across more crazy.

Jesus's response is not to engage but simply to shift the issue. Who is Jesus' family? The ones who do the will of God. Maybe this gives us the key to understanding why his family thought he was mad – Jesus clearly had a different centre to his life. It didn't revolve around the normal stuff, but around God. Those he was closest to were those who shared this centre. If you like, he was orbiting in a different solar system than his family. Jesus is clear that the family that he recognises are those who are also following this attraction to God and whose lives are ordered and oriented towards their maker.

Jesus gazes at the crowd, the hungry, tired, dusty, desperate bunch of people who have followed him in the hope of being healed, freed from evil or just hearing his teaching; and Jesus declares that these are his mother and brothers and sisters. These are the ones who are doing God's will. And for the crowd, this is both an invitation and a promise. It's an invitation to be part of Jesus' family and it's a promise of family benefits to those who do.

To anyone in the crowd, Jesus' family is one of open membership. Anyone who decides to follow God is a brother or sister to Jesus himself and therefore a child of God. As Jesus looks around the room his gaze is inviting. Come. Be part of my family. Make the centre of your life, as mine, oriented towards God, your maker

It's an invitation but it's also a promise. Jesus' family came to take him away. He was an embarrassment and he needed removing. For Jesus though, he gazes at the ragtag crowd and invites them to be part of his family. Clearly, he will never be embarrassed of them. He will never quietly remove them and leave them. Instead, Jesus works with them, frees them from their afflictions and travels with them on their way.

The same promises and invitations are addressed to us today. As I said at the start, there is no middle ground; whatever you think of Jesus, you can't think nothing. Perhaps you also are like his family and you think he was just a crazed teacher who pushed himself so far that he lost himself and lost touch with reality. You can't say he was just mistaken – that would make him a madman.

Perhaps for you, the kindest thing would just be to shuffle off and disassociate from him. Perhaps you are with the scribes and you think Jesus is dangerously evil. That's quite a different thing from thinking that religion can be dangerous, or that organised religions are hypocritical and power-hungry. We're only thinking about Jesus at the moment, not his desperately flawed followers. Perhaps you think Jesus was in fact a terrible person, his miracles were something malign and his teachings a pack of lies.

If neither of those options appeal, there is no middle ground; you are left with the uncomfortable truth that Jesus is the Son of God who invites us to be his brother and sisters and promises liberation and new life for those who follow God's way. Suppose this is true, then the invitation and promise is for you and today might well be the day when you choose to accept it and start life again with this new orientation as a child of God and a member of Jesus' family. You have options, just as the crowd did: you can go home and get on with your life having not quite scratched the itch that brought you into the room with Jesus in the first place, or you can take up Jesus invitation to be his brother and reorient your life to follow God's way.

If that's you, I don't want you to leave without letting me know. It's doesn't have to be embarrassing – just put your name and number on any piece of paper that's on your pew and at some point before you leave the building, come up and leave it on the altar at the front of church here. I'll gather them up when I leave and I'll contact you in the next week so we can chat and I can pray with you.

Let me pray for us all now though: Father God. Thank you for Jesus and for his invitation to be part of your family. Help us to accept that invitation and please reassure us of your promise that you will never leave us or be embarrassed of us. Help us to live lives oriented to you and to follow Jesus as our guide to new life. Take away all our past memories of guilt and shame and help us to walk tall again as new lives in your sight. Amen.