

Prelude: Leer mij Uw weg, o Heer (Teach me your way o Lord) by Klaas Jan Mulder, played by John Crombie.

Words of welcome:

As we begin the service this morning we remember that though we are not meeting together in person, or in a special building, yet we are the church so long as we seek to praise and serve God. So our first hymn is

Hymn: The Church is wherever God's people are praising

Prayer:

Lord God, we pause again in our lives to come to you, to hear your word and bring you our prayers. We pause to remember Jesus' story and seek to learn to walk in his ways. We pause to remember that it is not in our gathering that we are the church, but in our discipleship. And we pause to worship you, to praise you for who you are and all that you have done and are doing in this world and in our lives.

And so we lift up our hearts to you, lifting them from the mundane cares and worries that fill our days, lifting them from the distractions we use to fill empty time, lifting them from all that is less than your beauty and goodness and love. We lift up our hearts and ask that you would take our prayers and join them with the prayers of all the saints across the world and through the ages, and with the prayers of Jesus himself, as we pray in the words that he taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. Amen,

Reading: Mark 3:20-35

There is, said the writer of Ecclesiastes, nothing new under the sun. Not even celebrity culture and popular curiosity. People who lament the rise of the celebrity in these internet and media-heavy days, know very little either of history or of scripture. There have always been people who have caught the public imagination, and many, most, of them have been forgotten by the sweep of history. Most, but not all. And certainly not Jesus.

What we have going on in this incident is that Jesus, who has been teaching by the sea of Galilee, has returned home to Capernaum but the crowds have not returned to their homes – those crowds for whom he was prepared by having a boat handy when he was teaching them. Instead they have followed him, they are door-stepping him, crowding around, making a noise, peering in the window. All the things that most of us would hate about being famous, the things that children and young people who aspire to be seen and known have not thought about, these things were happening to Jesus. No, there was no Twitter around in these days, but there was a very efficient grape-vine of gossip and news. From outside the situation, it looked as though things were getting out of hand.

That was certainly how it looked to Jesus' family. Later, we know, Jesus' family were to be strong supporters of his message and his life-work; but just now it seems to them that things are just getting weird and he really ought to cool his jets. Did he know what people were saying? Did he know that part of the reason they came to see him was because they thought that he was powerful, yes, but also mad, bad, and dangerous to know? Did he

know that they came because that frisson of danger has always been appealing to people? Jesus' mother and brothers did not believe these rumours, of course, but they didn't like hearing them. And they didn't know how to counter them.

I don't think that Jesus would have been surprised at the news that people thought he was in league with the devil. If you insist that people draw their own conclusions from what you are doing and saying; if you won't allow anyone to hand the crowds a ready-made doctrine of who you are and why you are and what you are, then you must accept that not everyone will see things the same way. What he did was odd. It was powerful and it was odd. There were others who tried to heal the broken and abusive spirits in people in those days, but they had much more limited success. And they didn't like that. They didn't like that Jesus could do what was needed. And rather than look and listen and learn from Jesus: rather than look and listen and learn that Jesus' words were more powerful and more healing because they came from a heart of love not from a desire to gain influence or even to gain renown, they tried to undermine him. Rather than learn, it was easier to bad-mouth Jesus, to say that if he did it better it must be because he knew more about such things, and who would know more about the works of the devil than someone who was in league with his Satanic majesty?

In their concern for him, I think that Jesus' mother and brothers maybe forgot that Jesus would know what to say. For the family, the best thing would be for Jesus to quieten down until people had forgotten about him and had stopped thinking about what he was doing and drawing the wrong conclusions. But Jesus was ready to meet his accusers' challenges head on. He did it with logic – how can Satan be divided against himself? Why would the devil want to see himself driven out? And he did it by carrying accusation to his accusers. How dare they be so confident that what they were seeing was not the work of God? And if they were so blind, how did they expect to be forgiven? Jesus might not have welcomed the bad press – who would? – or the intrusive crowds, but by now he had worked out how to deal with it all. No one could stop him, not by wild accusations and not by appealing to family solidarity.

Reading: Galatians 3:23-4:7

Hymn: In Christ there is no East or West

Jesus' way of dealing with the crowds and the false accusations was in some ways more shocking than the accusations themselves. He was accused of being in league with Satan, or being mad, accusations he can meet with clear logic. But then, when his family try to get him to calm down and quieten down, he says something far more shocking, something which Paul will pick up on and tease out further in his letter to the Galatian church. Jesus denies the sacred ties of family and in a word that Mary and his siblings must have found hurtful and difficult, he names those who are with him as his family, and those who do the will of God as kin to him.

Great news for the disciples. But a kick in the teeth for the family.

The good news is like that. You can't say anything new without undermining what has until now passed for wisdom. You can't start a new thing – and Jesus came to make all things new – without taking power and position from the old ways. The ties of family were sacred to the Jews, as they are sacred to nearly every society around the world and throughout history. It makes sense that family should matter: we all are born into a family of some kind, and for most people family is what helps us grow and shapes our understanding of ourselves and of the world around. It is inbuilt into us that family matters. Those who grow up without

family are often those who feel rootless in the world, no matter how much family of their own they might have later. And so it is a given that family is important.

And Jesus is not disputing that – not here, anyway. In fact it is *because* family is important that his words about those who gather around him and do the will of God are so powerful. They form a family. Jesus' followers form a family. They have family ties which are more important than the ties to birth family. They are more nurturing, more loving, more critical (when did you ever know a family which wasn't critical of its members?) more rooting, more world-view shaping, more self-view focussing than the ties to our birth families.

Paul was to say that this applied outside the Jewish world as well, that across cultures and nations our ties to those who follow Jesus, who God calls his children, are of primary importance. None of us are God's only child but are re-born in Jesus into God's family of children. And that is our most important belonging place.

We could now spend several hours unpacking what that means. But we won't!

Instead, just as Jesus left people to draw their own conclusions, I will leave you with the task of thinking about it, and thinking about what being part of God's family has to say about your priorities:

about family life; about care for people around us;

about the way you engage with your fellow-believers, who are children of God;

about the church across the world;

about time and money and so much more.

If being family with Jesus is important it will have something to say to just about everything you can think of.

Meanwhile, we are reading this Gospel to find out how to follow Jesus. So watching Jesus with his first disciples, what can you discover about following him?

We see him misunderstood, to put it mildly, and accused and abused.

We see him ready for that and prepared to argue back.

We see him confronted by those who knew him well.

And we see him prepared to say things that will hurt some, so that he can affirm his new priority for those who, like us, were trying to learn from him.

This is not gentle Jesus, but a man who is prepared to deal out thought-provoking verbal blows, so that he can defend the love and growth of the disciples he is cherishing. What he was doing with his followers mattered to him. Their learning and growing mattered. Our learning and growing matters to him as well: do we make it the priority that Jesus does?

Hymn: Jesus put this song into our hearts

Prayer

Lord God, who loves us and who cares that we should grow in your love, who loves us and has welcomed us into your family, who loves us and shows it in sending Jesus for us, we first of all would thank you for your love. We thank you for the amazing gift that you, the God of all, should care for us: for us as a human species and for each one of us as your children.

There are no words to express our gratitude, but you see our hearts and know.

As your children, as members of your family, we pray that you would help us to grow in our love for you and yours. With all the other voices that call for our allegiance, may the gratitude we have for your love keep us from ever letting anything else, even your other good gifts, be more important to us than that we are born anew into your family. May we take the

trouble to learn daily more of what that means, and as we learn, enlarge our wonder and our gratitude.

We pray today for the earthly families into which we were born. We pray for parents, for children, for siblings, for wider family members, asking for your blessing. We pray for families that are happy and united, and for families which are divided and at odds. And we pray for families who cannot come together in these days and who miss each other. We pray for people who have no family and who are alone in the world. Teach us to value our families, and in valuing them, to learn to value your family even more.

We pray for the family of church, here where we are not meeting as we once did, and around the world where our brothers and sisters face various challenges. We pray especially for those who live in danger because they are proud to belong to your family of church. And we pray for our brothers and sisters in Libis and Kostalek, living with restrictions and seeking ways to show your love to the community around them.

Lord God, you have called us to be your children. Help us in these days to show what we are by the way that we live our lives. We pray for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Hymn Forth in Thy name, O Lord, I go

Benediction

As children in God's family

Live in God's way, rejoice in God's love and show God's grace to all.

And the blessing of God Almighty,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you now and always.

Amen.

Postlude Trumpet tune by Charpentier. Played by Alan Buchan.