

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Crowds and Quiet

Rev. Catherine Buchan

Sunday 4th March 2012

Exodus 16:9-15

Mark 3:20-35

Have you ever read the gospels, read about the amazing things that Jesus did, and thought "Things must have been different then"? In fact, not just reading the Gospels, but reading almost any part of the Bible, you can come away with that impression. We read of people talking with God and hearing God speak to them, clearly. We read of miraculous feeding - in the desert, in a famine and by Jesus - of hungry lions having their mouths shut, of waters parting to make paths, of people going up to heaven in chariots of fire, of all kinds of strange, abnormal things going on, and sometimes it seems that no one is turning a hair!

In my last parish I used to visit a dear old lady who was housebound and going blind. However she could still hear the television news, if she turned it up loud enough, and to this she was addicted. The only problem was - that since she did not get out much - she was left with the impression that the distressing events which the news programmes told her about were normal, went on everywhere, every day. The result was that, safe in her own home, in a village smaller than Laggan and even more law-abiding, Bertha was afraid. When she expressed her fear to me I used to say to her, "But Bertha, these things are in the news because they are unusual. If everyone did that, then it would be distressing, but not news. They tell you about things so that you know what is unusual in the world." Not entirely true, especially of international news, but it was the local news which Bertha found more alarming.

What I told Bertha of the news is also true of Biblical stories. They are recorded precisely because they are important and unusual. Not everyone saw lions shut their mouths. The river Jordan did not part its waters every day. Miraculous feeding was only for very rare occasions. Not everyone could discern God's voice, far less act on it. People were not used to seeing disease healed or demons driven out. Things were not so different then, and what would be strange to us was also strange to people living back then. Strange, and alarming.

What Jesus did was strange and alarming. It discomposed his own family and it upset the official world. He couldn't be easily pigeon-holed, and that meant that he was dangerous. When we don't understand someone or something there is a great tendency to demonise it or them. People who are different are unsettling for us. (Although when we really take the time to get to know people we find that everyone is different.) You see it in the school playground, where the child who is seen to be different is picked on and teased. Children know all about it. I remember Kevin, a boy in my class at primary school, running away rather than come to school wearing shorts in winter. His harassed mother could not understand it: it was such a little thing, and just for one day while she got his trousers washed. But Kevin knew that if he was different on that day he would be teased for many days. And he was right.

When the scribes from Jerusalem could not quite categorise Jesus - he had no official standing of any sort, but he was teaching with authority and doing these impossible things, they decided that the best thing to do was to demonise him - literally, to make him out to be demonic. It is the worst thing they could say about anyone, the worst sort of pigeon hole they could try to squeeze Jesus into. They did it in hope that like my school-mate Kevin, Jesus would run away, afraid of what that

label of difference would lead to. They did it hoping that the people would heed them, and turn from Jesus, not with indifference, but with revulsion.

But Jesus was not a child in the playground. He was not to be so easily scared. Jesus had spent time in the wilderness with God, getting straight just who and what he was and how he was to do his work, and the gibes of others could not deflect him. Instead of running from the Scribes, he called them to come to him, and then he calmly pointed out that what they accused him of was simply ridiculous. If he were doing his deeds of powerful good by the power of evil, then the power of evil was broken, divided against itself. And if the good he was doing was not done by that power of evil, then also the power of evil was broken, like a strong man being tied up. In other words, whether the Scribes were right or wrong, what Jesus was doing indicated that the power of evil was broken, which could only be a good thing, and, of course, good things cannot come from evil.

Jesus' critics had, by lashing out with the worst they could think of, actually painted themselves into a corner. Once you have labelled the work of the Holy Spirit as the work of the devil, there really is no way back, without climbing down. It is a bit like holding a conspiracy theory. Those who believe, for instance, that the moon landings were faked, and that the U.S authorities agreed to put out an untrue story, can never be convinced they are wrong, because, anything that seems to go against their theory just becomes part of a wider and wider perception of conspiracy. For conspiracy theorists of whatever variety, all the evidence you see will simply confirm your own theory, because seeing it with your own slant on it, you will be blind to the truth.

And so the unforgivable sin which Jesus talks of doesn't mean that there is one sin in particular which God thinks is so bad that it simply cannot be forgiven, it means that there is one sin, one way of looking at life, which will preclude you from seeing your need of forgiveness and asking for it. If you decide that the doctor who is offering to perform a life-saving operation on you is in fact a wicked murderer, you will never give your consent to the operation.

Those who want to paint Jesus as mad or wicked are still very much with us. Those who want to discredit the church which bears his name will always find support for their litanies of hate. What Jesus did and what he claimed was startling: what he taught was a radical love which challenges every part of life, in a way which is inescapable if you really listen to it. The pigeon holes in which people try to contain him include the innocuous "good person" or "religious leader" or slightly edgier "revolutionary". But none of these allow him to be who he was and is: the holy Son of God who came to redeem the world from its sin.

It was C. S. Lewis who said that you can't call Jesus just a teacher or a good man. If what he claimed about himself wasn't true, then he was either mad or bad. But if it was true, then he is God. There is no fourth alternative. No wonder even his family were confused by him. You don't expect the elder son to turn out so different.

It is said that if you ask any representative group of Scots - like the congregation here - to raise their hand if they have family in Canada, Australia or New Zealand, you will always get one or two hands up. For historical reasons Scots have been very much scattered over the world and especially some of the former colonies. In Jesus' day families stayed very close indeed. Very often they would remain in the same house, working in the family business, bringing up their children to do the same. Jesus started out in that pattern: he was the carpenter from Nazareth, like Joseph before him.

But eldest son of a first century Jewish family was another pigeon hole which could not contain Jesus. In the wilderness he had learned to put God and God's ways before anything, and that meant before the sacred ties of family. Now that is radical. It was radical then and it still is today. If there

is one entity that is held as special, most important, it is the family unit. People put family before all else: for some it has become the idol before which they bow down, putting family before worship of God or love of neighbour. And we need family. And it is good to love and be loved by family. Jesus knew that. Because he knew the goodness of family he ripped open the normal boundaries of family life. He flung wide his arms and invited us all to be in his family. Anyone, he said, "who does the will of God, is my brother and sister and mother." Not anyone who believes the right things, but anyone who does the will of God.

Jesus wasn't rejecting his earthly family. We know that later his mother and at least some of his brothers were to be among the disciples in the early church. But family and the wonders of family love is flung wider. In this little incident we see the inclusiveness of God's kingdom in all its wonder.

This morning we will gather around the Lord's table. He is our Lord, whom we seek to serve and follow. He is our Lord whose will we want to do. And he is our brother. We gather as family, with the strong bonds of family love and history holding us together. You don't choose your family, and we perhaps, did not choose each other (far less so than members of some urban churches who do choose which of many churches they will be a part of). We gather together because we are family, and in the unity of the wheat being made into bread, we see our unity, our communion.

Amen