

Mark 3: 20-35

Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. ²¹ When his family^(a) heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

²² And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons."

²³ So Jesus called them over to him and began to speak to them in parables: "How can Satan drive out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. ²⁶ And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. ²⁷ In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man's house. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin."

³⁰ He said this because they were saying, "He has an impure spirit."

³¹ Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. ³² A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

³³ "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

³⁴ Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

I want to start today with a poem by Dr Seuss. It's called the Zax.

One day, making tracks
In the prairie of Prax,
Came a North-Going Zax
And a South-Going Zax.

And it happened that both of them came to a place
Where they bumped. There they stood.
Foot to foot. Face to face.

"Look here, now!" the North-Going Zax said, "I say!
You are blocking my path. You are right in my way.
I'm a North-Going Zax and I always go north.
Get out of my way, now, and let me go forth!"

"Who's in whose way?" snapped the South-Going Zax.
"I always go south, making south-going tracks.
So you're in MY way! And I ask you to move
And let me go south in my south-going groove."

Then the North-Going Zax puffed his chest up with pride.
"I never," he said, "take a step to one side.
And I'll prove to you that I won't change my ways
If I have to keep standing here fifty-nine days!"

"And I'll prove to YOU," yelled the South-Going Zax,
"That I can stand here in the prairie of Prax
For fifty-nine years! For I live by a rule

That I learned as a boy back in South-Going School.
Never budge! That's my rule. Never budge in the least!
Not an inch to the west! Not an inch to the east!
I'll stay here, not budging! I can and I will
If it makes you and me and the whole world stand still!"

Well...

Of course the world didn't stand still. The world grew.
In a couple of years, the new highway came through
And they built it right over those two stubborn Zax
And left them there, standing un-budged in their tracks.

I love Dr Seuss. And I think the subject of this short story sounds familiar, doesn't it?
Hopefully this will illustrate a point that I think the Gospel reading is making.

So, in Mark 3 Jesus has just started his ministry, he has disciples and followers, and his family think 'who does he think he is? Has this all gone to his head?' and they want to talk sense to him. Perhaps they see trouble coming — you can't have celebrity without scandal. They wonder if he's mad!

The scribes from Jerusalem reason that if Jesus can cast out demons it is because he has a greater power than those demons. That power has to be either good or evil. If he can't be good and yet not one of them — he has to be bad! 'He's possessed by Beelzebub,' they say. He casts out demons by the ruler of demons!

It's a shocking accusation. Jesus, however, keeps it cool. He doesn't trade blows, but gets them discussing Satan seriously.

During this time people had started to use 'Satan' as the specific name of the devil, but it still held its original Hebrew meaning: 'Accuser' or 'Adversary'. In Mark 8, when Jesus tells Peter 'Get behind me, satan,' he is not accusing Peter of being the Devil. He is warning Peter that he has forgotten his place and is an adversary to the will of God. Mark tells us that he began to speak to them in parables — so as Jesus continues to discuss satan, we must understand that he is not speaking literally, but in picture language.

How can satan cast out satan? The answer to the question is obvious, isn't it? A kingdom in civil war *is* crippled. A house divided against itself *cannot* stand! The threefold repetition tells us it's an important point. He reminds us that evil must be self-defeating. Competition and Self-interest cannot beat collaboration and mutual care.

But also *accusation cannot cast out accusation*. My two Zax in the poem were equal and opposite adversaries. Neither could win.

The warring between Israel and Palestine has gone on for years and is madness. Each side has continued to stoke the anger of the other for years. Israel seems to be attempting to end the problem — by genocide. That war crime won't end things though — it would draw neighbouring countries and Israel's allies into an ever larger war.

It's an archetypal warring relationship. We look at them and ask: 'can't they see what they're doing?' Can't they see that they've been doing this for over fifty years and not got anywhere?' The longer any conflict continues the harder it is to find moral high ground — there is none. Enemies increasingly look the same, while claiming to be poles apart. Adversary can't cast out adversary. The attitude of being an adversary cannot stop this attitude in another person, only escalate it. Satan cannot cast out Satan.

The pattern is true for other conflicts, great and small. So Jesus didn't *fight* for peace. He didn't *fight* the Romans, bad though they were. He didn't use swords, didn't fight death with

death — he didn't smite the Chief Priest or Pontius Pilate — though he had the power, we never saw him use it.

Instead he taught 'turn the other cheek' and he laid down his life, absorbing Satan's venom, rather than fuelling Satan. In resurrection that submission to death subverted death — he defeated death not by death, but with methods Satan cannot use — life.

Now, did Jesus abandon justice, did he wink at sin when he turned the other cheek? No. The polar opposite of 'Satan casting out Satan', is refusing to perpetuate hurt; breaking the chain of sin — harm provoking harm, provoking harm. Jesus did not fight the strong man (v27), who is Satan, or accusation, or this attitude of opposition if you will: but bound him, and plundered for his kingdom those the devil thought his own! The moral here — Don't fight back, but defeat Satan with love.

In the final part of this passage, Jesus's mother and brothers come to take him away. He's creating a scene! But Jesus has a telling reply to this too. He says that family ties aren't as important as everyone thinks. What matters now, is to do the will of God. The person who does *that* is my brother and sister and mother. Baptismal water is thicker than blood.

This is shocking. Judaism had been marked by family, tribe and heritage since Abraham. Paul gives an example of this by citing his credentials in his letter to the Philippians. Abraham was promised as many descendants as the stars in the sky. They were set apart by circumcision, by the kosher laws. Becoming a Jew was really difficult. The gates to covenant grace were closely guarded. Jesus dramatically disregards this heritage and just says doing God's will is more important. In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that peacemakers will be called children of God, and elsewhere those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. Family is nothing — we are all brothers and sisters in Christ!

Jesus faced early opposition, but did not respond to these accusations of madness or badness, except with truth, clarity and love. He showed that being drawn into accusation was as wrong and futile as the two axes of our poem. He argued that faith was better than family.

In his book 'Mere Christianity' CS Lewis makes the case that we must 'do' something with what we know about Jesus — we must call him mad, or bad, or God. In his wisdom he couldn't be mad; in his goodness, he couldn't be bad. The option left to his family, and to the accusers who said he worked by Satan's power, was that he was God.

Amen.

SDG.