

Sermon: Sin against the Holy Spirit

Mark 3:20-35

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Green is the color of nature, of growth, of vitality. In the long 'green' season ahead of us in church - we call it 'ordinary time' we will focus on the ordinary Christian life. The ordinary Christian life? That is the life focussed on Jesus Christ.

It is very important for our spiritual life that we focus on him, and also, that we focus well.

Many people look at Jesus and what do they see? Scribes from Jerusalem had come all the way to see Jesus. They saw and they concluded, 'He is possessed by the devil' and 'he has an unclean spirit'

His family came to see him, and their conclusion? 'He is out of his mind.' To say that someone is crazy is hardly nicer than to say that he is possessed by the devil. In Arabic it is literary the same - *hua magnoon*, he is crazy, literally means, he has a spirit.

What happened

What did these people see when they looked at Jesus? What did they see to think he was mad?

In the beginning of the gospel of St Mark we read that Jesus has started his ministry, and he healed many people, he liberated people of evil spirits, and he did this on a scale that was really amazing.

If that had been the only thing he did, he might have gotten away with it. But he also said that he can forgive sins - something that is absolutely the prerogative of God.

But he also did not mind at all to have close communion with very sinful people.

And he did not care too much about the fine print of the Jewish legislation.

And he then also decided to send out 12 disciples to preach his Gospel and to heal the people and to drive demons out.

This happened in Galilee, in the north of Israel, and in Jerusalem the religious leaders became very worried. While the people in Galilee rejoiced in how God cared for them, the theologians in Jerusalem were totally upset.

Maybe because Jesus attracted large crowds; maybe because he undermined the religious views of the establishment; maybe because of his claims to divinity, maybe because he had an effective ministry that actually helped the people.

So they started this rumor that surely, Jesus must be possessed by Beelzebul. That was one of the Jewish names for the devil, meaning Lord of the Flies. They equated Jesus with flies and with the sort of stuff that attracts flies. Very very demeaning.

Did they try to create a wedge between Jesus and the masses? I guess so. But not successful anyway, the masses continued to come.

Would you not come to Jesus, if from him you could receive unconditional love, and divine forgiveness, and support, and healing, yes really all you need? Let those liberal theologians talk - we know what Jesus can do for us.

Jesus was so popular among the people that he did not even have time to eat.

Then his family came to get him. 'He is out of his mind', they said. It is bad enough to have enemies, but to have your family think that you are crazy is particularly tough. Even though the crowds loved Jesus, it must have hurt him deeply that his family was not on his side.

Sin against the Holy Spirit

And in this context of mockery and rejection, Jesus made his statement that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. This was not the time to call people and tell them 'come to me, all who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.' That is what Jesus said to those who believed in him.

To those who equate him with the devil and with being crazy, to those he said: 'Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.'

What did Jesus mean with this? Could he not have a bit clearer? This saying of Jesus has caused the most serious pastoral problems.

There are so many guilt-ridden people asking for an explanation of this verse; people who are predisposed to feeling guilty, either because of their personality type or because they have been pressed down by adversity. or because they have a distorted view of God.

As soon as they come across this passage, they are convinced that they have somehow blasphemed against the Holy Spirit, even though they haven't the faintest notion of what exactly 'blaspheming against the Holy Spirit' means and even though they cannot recollect ever having done whatever it is that they cannot explain anyway.

Nevertheless, they are certain that they must have done it somewhere along the line and that explains why they are so miserable.

Maybe these people are miserable but because for some reason they are volunteering for excessive guilt feelings; these are linked to how we view ourselves, but also to how we look at God.

Many Christians go through periods like this, at least at some point in our youth, if not during our adulthood, for instance when we face a major crisis about our self-worth, or when we have been disappointed in our less than perfect behavior.

When it happens, we should be listening to the words of the apostle John, who in his letter says that when our hearts condemn us, we should remember that Jesus is greater than our heart.

But there are moments when the condemnation of the heart, our self-condemnation, when combined with this passage about blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, drowns out the loudest and greatest reassurance.

Jesus says to guilt-ridden Christians, 'come to me, all who are heavy laden', but such people seem often unable to let that sink in, and they are more impressed by the words that Jesus spoke against those who did not believe in him and who treated him as if he were demon-possessed and crazy.

But first, listen well to what he says before that. 'All sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter.' This is Gospel! You have committed sins? Bad sins? Capital sins? Mortal sins? Many sins? They will be forgiven. 'All sins will be forgiven'.

What it means - being family of Jesus

All sins will be forgiven if we believe. If we do not believe, God as it were raises his hands in despair. "I offered you full forgiveness. I paid the price with my own life. What can I do if you do not open your hands in faith to receive my forgiveness...."

That is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit; that will not be forgiven.

So what is that?

It is doing what the scribes and those family members of Jesus did. It is to listen to Jesus, to see what he did, and to then mock him and call him insane. or to say it a bit more simple: it is not to believe in him.

Sin against the Holy Spirit is to not recognize that God through the Holy Spirit is at work in Jesus; to not recognize Jesus as the Temple of God. To not accept that his life and death and resurrection were for our salvation.

The theologians and some of the family members of Jesus saw him, and mocked. This sin of unbelief can never be forgiven - exactly because belief in Jesus is the precondition for God's forgiveness.

Jesus turns away from the theologians, even from those family members that rejected him, and he addressed the crowd. He looked at those people, and said: 'you are my mother and my brothers, for whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.'

What makes us family with Jesus, is to do the will of God. These crowds around Jesus, they do the will of God.

oh, if only we can be part of these masses. They were very imperfect people, that is why Jesus had to comfort them with the promise that all sins will be forgiven. But imperfect people get this promise of Jesus that all sins will be forgiven - if they only believe in Him.

That is why our many imperfections must never make us desperate. There is no reason, for all your sins are forgiven - because the perfect sacrifice was made by Jesus Christ on the altar of the universe, once and for all.

We, imperfect people, we can rejoice. The slate is clean. And it stays clean, if we stay in the faith. God's love, His, patience and His forgiveness, they are never exhausted.

If only we are family of Jesus Christ, by doing the will of God.

Now is there not a sting in those last words? Does Jesus not suggest that it is only our perfect obedience - doing the will of God - that makes us pleasing to God?

Not at all. Think of the masses around Jesus. What does He mean when he states emphatically that they do the will of God? He does not mean they are perfect. The only thing they do, is to faithfully listen to the words of Jesus. Surely they had the intention to also obey, but well, we all know the weakness of our intentions and the imperfect outcomes of our efforts to obey.

We will always hold on to Jesus' words of grace, 'all sins will be forgiven....' by God. By grace. Because of his love.

And even unbelief - even this blasphemy of the Holy Spirit can be forgiven... if we do not stay in our unbelief.

St Augustine wrote: (Sermon on New Testament Lessons 21.35)

It was not that this was a blasphemy that under no circumstances could be forgiven, for even this shall be forgiven if right repentance follows it.

Even the blasphemy against the Spirit - rejecting Jesus - can be forgiven. If we move from unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ. No-one is beyond hope as long as we have our breath.

Conclusion

So we do not have to suffer under guilt and think that all is lost for us. Nothing you have ever done or will ever do, can separate you from the love of the forgiving God.

The only thing that keeps us away from God, is if we do not believe in Jesus Christ. So let us today, and in the green season of growth ahead of us, sit at the feet of Jesus, to learn from him, to believe in Him. If we do this, Jesus says, you are my brothers and sisters.

And God the Father says, you are my child. Fear not. Your sins are blotted out. Nothing can separate you from my love.

Amen