

First Sunday after Trinity 2021 (6.06.2021)

2 Corinthians 4: 13 – 5: 1; Mark 3: 20 – end

If there's one take-away phrase from this morning's Bible readings that I want everyone to hang on to, it comes in the first lesson, from 2 Corinthians, which Paula read. It is "Do not lose heart." That is the overall message of the readings we've had this morning and it's the overall message of this sermon: do not lose heart.

Hang on to that thought, though, because we're not going to arrive at it too quickly. It would be lazy and simplistic to gloss over the really quite challenging aspects of today's readings, particularly in the Gospel reading, and to plunge instead straight to an encouraging platitude.

We have this morning, in words attributed to Jesus himself in St. Mark's Gospel, a suggestion that there is an Unforgiveable Sin. It may be that, if we take a

critical view of how the Gospel came to be written and edited and ended up in the form that we receive it, that this saying reflects a concern to assert church order within the context for which Mark was originally writing, rather than a verbatim account of words actually spoken by Jesus during his earthly life. But it still remains that this is the text as we receive it and it has the authority of Scripture: whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.

The thing is, though, if you asked me to summarise in a few words what the overall message of the Bible is, I would say simply that it tells us God is love. God's love is so absolute and unconditional that Jesus gave his life for us – all of us, no matter who we are, where we're from, what we've done, what the colour of our skin is, what shape our family is or how complicated it is. Jesus loves us all enough to give his life for us. There's nothing we can do to earn that love. But the flip side of that is that there is nothing we can do to

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prevent that love. There is nothing that stands between us and God's love because Jesus has dealt with it all: all the alienation, all the destructiveness, all the darkness, all the guilt, all the fear, all the you name it. Nothing. There is nothing that cannot be overcome by the love of God through Jesus.

And the idea of an Unforgiveable Sin flies in the face of this. But if that worries you, it probably means you have nothing to worry about! Because what Jesus said to the Scribes from Jerusalem was the Unforgiveable Sin was blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. And believe me it is not blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to entertain doubt and to wrestle with Scripture.

I spend much of my life trying to reassure people who have doubts. Doubting is good. Doubting is evidence of a real, living, engaged and dynamic faith. It is a sign of spiritual integrity and maturity. What we don't want to see is sterile, lifeless, superficial faith which cracks like a veneer when it's placed under stress. God

gives us latitude. He allows us to wander, to commit heresy. Don't be frightened of it. Jesus says in the very same sentence, "people will be forgiven for their sins *and whatever blasphemies they utter.*" Don't be afraid to enter into – and thrive – on the cut and thrust of working out your salvation. You can't go wrong, ultimately, because God will gently bring you back and guide you home.

This is what Paul was saying to the Corinthians in our first reading. We're looking at what cannot be seen. So there's no point in being legalistic and pretending we've got it all tied up. Our perception will always be messy and will always have loose ends. There's nothing fatal in that. What is fatal is being like the Scribes from Jerusalem in this story who refuse to acknowledge Jesus at all. That could be described as a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

And then this headache of an episode is wrapped up in a most disturbing exchange between Jesus and his

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family. Jesus fails to comply with the gentle, warm, cuddly image we create for him. Even Jesus can be annoying. And sons always find their mothers exasperating. But let's just overlook for the moment our disappointment at the way Jesus speaks to his relatives and let's look at the other side of the coin. Let's look at who Jesus says he does count as his brother and sister and mother: whoever *does* the will of God. It's not who understands the most about God. It's not who can articulate the most coherent theology. It's who gets on with living out a life in the service of others.

So don't lose heart. Just get on with doing it.

Amen.