

**“WHAT’S YOUR RESPONSE? (Mark 11)”**

***Mark 3:20-35***

So who is this Jesus, then? We’re some way into this story that Mark has written about the life of Jesus and we’ve seen him in a number of different situations. What do you think of it? Not of the way Mark tells the story, nor of the sermons you’ve heard here all about it. But what is your response to this Jesus? You’ll be very hard pressed to find an intelligent person who is prepared to deny that he did actually exist. The assertion that someone called Jesus lived in first century Palestine, that he was regarded by many as the Messiah, and that he said and did a great many unusual and inspiring things, is pretty well historical fact in the minds of both supporters and enemies alike.

And there is no doubt at all that this man Jesus has had a powerful effect on the lives of men and women down through the centuries. The largest religion in the world – Christianity – claims to follow his teachings. Wars have been fought in his name. Revolutions have been both inspired and prevented by his teachings. He provokes argument and commitment, delight and despair depending on your point of view. But the bottom line is really what you think of him and how you respond to him? Whoever you are, you have to make up your mind about him. Do you follow him, reject him, ignore him, patronise him, domesticate him, judge him, obey him, believe him, dismiss him? It’s entirely up to you – but there are consequences dependent on your decision.

The passage from Mark’s story of Jesus that we have read this morning emphasises what I’ve just said with the descriptions of some of the responses to Jesus while he was living in Galilee. So far we have seen that Jesus’ profile has steadily risen in Palestine. He has excited devotion and hostility in more or less equal measure. But it continues to grow, as we see from the first few sentences of this reading. The crowds of ordinary people are now so great and so eager to see Jesus that his privacy is constantly invaded. He cannot even sit down to eat in a private house without people crushing in to see him. The “common people” (which is what we assume these are) can see that there’s something special about this man and they want a bit of it.

On the other hand, his critics are never far away – and if they are far away, they’ll make an effort to get closer. We read here that the teachers of the law, the custodians of the legal and religious heritage of the Jewish people who have been Jesus’ most vocal opponents up until now, have actually travelled from Jerusalem to have a look at him. These are the people who travel about the country to picket and protest, who want to make their voice of opposition heard wherever Jesus might be meeting people. The strange thing is – as Mark keeps on making very clear – the ordinary people seem to have grasped something of the significance of Jesus, whereas the religious leaders, the people who are supposed to be looking out for the ways in which the “*good tidings*” of their prophets are to be fulfilled, have completely missed the point. And in this story a third group of people are mentioned, too – Jesus’ own family: his mother (the only mention of her in Mark’s story), his brothers and, according to some manuscripts, his sisters. Different responses to Jesus; different reactions to his teaching and his life. Let me ask you again – what’s your response?

Do you look upon Jesus as a person who can change your life? Or do you see him as someone who is dangerous and deluded? Is he really the Messiah, the Christ, the appointed and anointed Son of God, whose words bear divine weight? Or is he just a very good and influential teacher who said some wise things – along with some stuff we can legitimately ignore today? Does he just make us feel guilty, or can he really forgive our sins and promise us an eternity of peace and joy? Many of you will be familiar with C S Lewis’s famous words in *Mere Christianity*. Let me quote them to you again this morning:

*“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a*

*level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”*

What’s your response? Is he mad, bad or who he claimed to be? What is the response of the family and the opponents of Jesus here? His family thought he was mad. The teachers of the law thought he was bad. And Jesus used both criticisms to make some further points about his radical new message and ministry.

For Jesus’ earthly family – some of whom we know later came to be his followers – what he has been doing so far in the region of Galilee has been too much to bear. They have seen the state things have got to – he can’t even have his meals in private – so they decide to go and sort him out. As far as they are concerned he is “*out of his mind*” (v21). That overlaps a bit with what the teachers of the law were saying, because at this time it was believed that mental illness (as we would now call it) was actually some kind of demonic possession.

Mark finishes the bit about the family after the interlude with the teachers of the law. Jesus is told that his family want to take him in hand and he starts to ask questions about who his family really are. This is a rhetorical device, obviously. Jesus is not actually disowning his earthly family – as I’ve already said, we know that some of his family became his followers and his brother James became one of the early leaders in the church, and Jesus is recorded as making arrangements for John to support his mother even while he was hanging on the cross. But he nevertheless subverts this idea of family to emphasise that relationship is at the heart of the gospel message. For fear of offending the sensibilities of some within the church, many Christians have shied away from the idea that the church is a family in recent years, but Jesus is quite explicit here. Those who follow him, who “*do God’s will*” are his family. Responding to Jesus in obedience and faith draws us into new relationships. Jesus does not call people to assent to a set of doctrinal beliefs: he calls people to live in relationship with him.

Now that would have been wonderful news for the first readers of Mark’s story. They were trying to follow Jesus at a time when there was a great deal of pressure on them. Many of them would have had to leave their homes and probably their families. Some of them were experiencing persecution and ostracism. Their comfortable and secure networks of relationships were starting to be broken up as a result of their allegiance to Jesus. So what an encouragement to know that there was a new set of relationships with Jesus and the people of God. And that is still, I hope, an encouragement for us today – as long as we all take it seriously. We are called not only into relationship with Jesus, but also with our “*brothers and sisters in Christ*”. We have the same kinds of obligations to each other within the Christian community that we have towards our natural family members. Surely that is not madness, but true sanity. So what’s your response?

Then Mark slips into this story about Jesus’ family the encounter with these religious leaders who have travelled all the way from Jerusalem to check out Jesus. They don’t think him mad: they think him bad. He’s been doing some amazing things, and they cannot explain it rationally. It is not within their belief system to acknowledge that Jesus must be working in the power of God, so the only alternative is to say that he is working in the power of Satan. They use the name Beelzebub, one of the pagan deities of the ancient world, rather than Satan, but the message is the same. It’s an attitude that you still see around today – the Toronto Blessing was demonic according to some people who couldn’t explain it in terms of their own belief system. I’ve heard Alpha described as demonic by those who don’t understand it. I’ve listened to a preacher say that another church leader with whom he fell out “*hates Jesus*”. Those who think of themselves as outside the religious arena say that Christianity is evil because of the ways in which it has been misused in the past.

The answer to those kinds of criticism is exactly what Jesus comes out with here. He exposes the illogicality of their argument quite simply. Jesus has been driving out demons and healing those who have been possessed by them and had their lives ruined by the effects of demonic activity. Why would he do that if he was in league with them? Surely if he was undoing Satan's work by the power of Satan himself, there must be something seriously wrong with Satan's strategy. He uses the examples of a kingdom and a house. If they're divided and fighting against themselves, then they're wasting their time. Jesus, through his healing and liberating work, is actually carrying off Satan's "*possessions*". There's no way he can be on Satan's side. Look at the good Jesus is doing – how can that possibly be termed demonic? It's a clear case of what he taught on another occasion – "*You will know them by their fruits.*" So what's your response?

Within his reply to the teachers of the law, Jesus makes a statement that has caused a good deal of heart-searching amongst Christians down through the centuries. In vv28-30 he deals with the "unforgivable sin". Every sin we commit will be forgiven, he says, except this sin against the Holy Spirit. Oh no! What does that actually mean? Have I committed it? Am I damned for ever? Have I committed it unintentionally? Did I perhaps commit it before I became a Christian, when I didn't know any better – and now I've really had it? If you're asking those questions, you're alright: don't worry.

This particular sin is all about our response to Jesus. That's why it's in this little story. This isn't some isolated statement that Mark popped in here because he couldn't seem to work it in anywhere else. It's not something that Jesus said as a kind of non-sequitur just to confuse people. We need to allow the context to help us see what he's on about. V30 actually tells us why he said it – "*Because they were saying; 'He has an evil spirit.'*" These people were calling what was good evil. The good work that Jesus was doing, the things that he was accomplishing in the power of the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, they are attributing to evil spirits. It's an attitude that Jesus is condemning.

And that attitude is one of closed-mindedness. It's an attitude of judgement and hard-heartedness. You see, these people were able to see that something unusual was going on here. Supernatural things were happening: people were being healed, demons were being exorcised, lives were being transformed. They could see that and they were prepared to accept that. But their minds were totally closed to the possibility that Jesus might be doing it because he was the Son of God. They could not conceive of Jesus being anything other than a charlatan. Despite all that they'd read about the Messiah, despite all that John the Baptist had said, despite all that Jesus was saying, they were not prepared to acknowledge that he might be right.

And that attitude is one which is effectively a deliberate rejection of Jesus and all that he was doing. Jesus is not condemning honest doubt, nor is he judging those who make a mistake or who do something unintentionally or in a moment of weakness. He is condemning those who have made their minds up, who have closed their minds to any new revelation. There are still plenty of them about. There are rationalists who refuse to accept anything that cannot be fully explained and quantified. There are atheists who have closed their minds to the possibility of God's existence. There are even those who call themselves Christians – the Pharisees and teachers of the law of the modern Church – who have sorted out their dogma and creeds to such an extent that they cannot find room for anything that does not fit in exactly with their own interpretation of the Bible. These are the people who end up trying to explain things away and who resist God when he tries to confront them.

As I've said already, if you're worried about this verse, you're alright. You may have problems, but nothing that Jesus cannot sort out with the help of his Holy Spirit. It's when you stop being worried by this verse because you don't believe it that you're in trouble. It's when you've deliberately and defiantly rejected what Jesus has to say, when you have dismissed any idea that he might have a claim on your life, when you have rejected the offer of forgiveness – that's when you're really up the creek. One writer (C E Graham Swift) sums it up like this: "*The unpardonable sin is not an isolated act or utterance, but an*

*attitude of defiant and deliberate rejection of light, a preference of darkness to light (John 3:19) ...Such an attitude of wilful unbelief might rapidly harden into a condition where repentance, and therefore forgiveness, become impossible.”*

So what’s your response to Jesus? The fact that you’re here at all this morning probably means that you haven’t yet got to the stage of “*defiant and deliberate rejection*”. But you still need to make your mind up, to decide whether you really do think Jesus is mad, bad or the Son of God. Whatever your choice, the consequences will be eternal.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Describe some of the different responses that people have to Jesus today. How has your response to Jesus changed over the years?
2. Why do you think Jesus’ family considered him “*out of his mind*”?
3. Look at v27. How might we apply that spiritually in terms of our engagement in spiritual warfare?
4. Do you have any insights to offer about the unforgivable sin? Has it ever worried you?
5. What are the implications of v35 for the Christian community? (Don’t answer in abstract terms, but relate your answer to the life of Wade Street Church.) What do we need to do about it?
6. Imagine you were encountering Jesus for the very first time – with no prior knowledge of him – through the first three chapters of Mark’s gospel. What’s your impression of him?
7. What have you learned from this passage?