

Matthew 12:22-50 Sermon Tregear 11.7.2021 – Signs, wonders, warnings and encouragements

In a week where our news has been dominated by coronavirus – how long will the lockdown last? What are the restrictions at the moment? Who are the silly people who've ignored the warnings? And for some it's been a more lonely time; for others there is the ongoing struggle with health difficulties. For some of us, like me, there's the distraction of sport – a new Aussie tennis champion in Ash Barty; State of Origin. It's easy to forget who is our king, who is the one who rules. So, it's good to stop and remember again right now as we look again at the life of Jesus.

Jesus asks us 2 questions this morning: Are you with me or against me? Are you in my family?

In our passage today the questions about Jesus rise again; who is this man? Last week we heard that he was the Son of Man; the Lord of the Sabbath; the Servant – was he truly the Son of David, the Messiah? In v.23 many people are thinking this.

There were really only two options. So much power was at work here it could only be from God, or from Satan? The Pharisees, not wanting to admit that Jesus acted with God's authority and therefore they should listen to him and obey him; they said the only other possibility – the prince of demons himself, Beelzebul, was giving Jesus the power. (By the way, Beelzebul literally means "lord of the Flies" or "Lord of the filth" – it was probably a kind of slang way of speaking about the Devil without actually using his name.) It follows on from last week doesn't it. The Pharisees see themselves as the keepers of the Jewish faith – they are the ones who will keep everyone following God on the right way. There is no humble attitude before God; they have no desire to repent or to learn from God. We saw in the video of the healing of the paralyzed man at the pool, all they were interested in was why was this done on the Sabbath. Who cares? God is clearly at work.

Jesus was welcoming outcasts; doing things on the Sabbath that seemed to be ignoring the law; he was announcing a kingdom in a way which was different to all they expected, he was turning their way of thinking upside down. Jesus was going in exactly the opposite direction to what they thought God wanted.

But the evidence is right there before them – he's healing people and casting out demons. The Pharisees can't deny that but what they can do is make this very serious charge against Jesus. By saying that he got his power from Satan they are saying that he's involved in witchcraft. If enough people believed their words that could be the end of Jesus' whole programme, his entire kingdom-movement.

Jesus' answer to these charges are very strong and profound. He sends the accusations straight back in a series of counter-questions and counter-charges – *“If Satan drives out Satan (notice Jesus is not afraid to use Satan's name) he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?”* Remember we encountered this accusation in chapter 9 after another healing of a demon-possessed man. We said then that the idea of Satan undoing his own work is ridiculous. You could imagine Satan giving power to levitate, for instance, or to gain wealth or fame, but if he gives Jesus power to undo the work of Satan that doesn't make sense. It's like Ash Davies building a house and then he hires a contractor to demolish part of the house. I don't think Ash is that stupid. Anyway, Satan certainly isn't that stupid. Satan wants to control people more and more – there's no way he's going to give Jesus power to set them free. But there's another important point Jesus makes. What about the Jewish exorcists, the Jews that are casting out demons, that are having some success – are they also in league with Satan? Of course not! Then Jesus nails it in v.28 – *If what I am doing is by the spirit of God, (which it clearly is) then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Jesus' work is a sign of something that his contemporaries were longing for deeply, but were not expecting to look like this. God's kingdom was coming upon them, bursting in as a force, a power to be reckoned with – and it's definitely power from God.*

The rest of the chapter includes some strong warnings for the Pharisees but also for anyone who dismisses who Jesus is or thinks that it doesn't matter too much. Jesus begins in v. 30 – *“whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”* These are very strong words. Jesus is gentle with us but he's also clear about how we are to express our allegiances. If you are not with me you are against me. There's no fence-sitting. You're either for Jesus or against him. Now Jesus is speaking into a situation where these Pharisees are saying that Jesus is actually getting power from Jesus' sworn enemy, which is ridiculous but at the same time so dangerous, as it could turn others away from Jesus. For us, reading this today, in our homes during lockdown, it's a reminder that we're either for Jesus or against him. We may not be like the Pharisees and be directly opposing him, but if we say *“Yes, Jesus is a good guy, but I've got my own life to live”*, then we are against him.

And then Jesus' next warning can be quite a scary one. I think the Message translation is helpful here READ v.32 – *There's nothing done or said that can't be forgiven. But if you deliberately persist in your slanders against God's spirit, you are rejecting the very one who forgives. If you reject the Son of Man out of some misunderstanding, the Holy Spirit can forgive you, but when you reject the Holy Spirit, you're sawing of the branch on which you're sitting, severing by your own perversity all connection with the One who forgives.”* You may well ask, *“Have I committed this unforgiveable sin?”* These words of Jesus are very much related to what has gone on before. The Pharisees were declaring God's work to be the work of the Devil. If you do that, it's not just that you won't be forgiven; you can't be forgiven because you

refuse to accept Jesus and you are in essence cutting off the branch on which you sit – you’re cutting yourself off from the very one from who forgiveness comes. So if you’re worried that you might commit this sin, the very fact that you’re worried about it is a good sign that you haven’t done so. Even after saying what he did many of the Pharisees and religious leaders still weren’t worried about rejecting everything that Jesus said. They weren’t going to repent! By refusing to recognise Jesus as the one who was bringing in God’s kingdom they were, essentially, cutting themselves off from its effects – they were cutting themselves off from the possibility of being forgiven. It’s a warning for all people.

And Jesus doesn’t muck around with what he continues to say.

His words in v.33 are very clear. He’s saying to the Pharisees; “You say that I am in league with the Devil. Well look at the kind of things I’m doing. Am I a tree that is producing good fruit or bad fruit?” Jesus is healing people, restoring people, getting rid of evil spirits that were damaging people’s lives; he’s even raising people from the dead. Bad fruit or good fruit? It’s pretty obvious. It’s clear that God is working through him yet they are rejecting him. So Jesus gets stuck into them – “You brood of vipers” – you’re like venomous snakes. Your words reveal what your heart is like. And Jesus warns them that they will need to give an account of their empty words.

Jesus is not, of course, saying that in the end the only thing that matters will be our words, that our deeds do no matter in comparison with what we say. That is completely false. What Jesus is saying is that at the judgement what we ARE is what matters, and that our words, especially those to which we give no particular thought, reveal what we are.

The question of who we are loyal to continues in v.38. Some of the Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign. And Jesus explains that he will not give a sign except for the sign of Jonah. So what is this? it’s clearly the fact that Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days and nights – Jesus will also be in the belly of the earth after his crucifixion for 3 days and nights and then rise again. This will be a definitive sign. But look what else Jesus says

The people of Ninevah repented when confronted with Jonah’s preaching; now the Jews are confronted with someone greater than Jonah and they refuse to repent. Similarly, the Queen of Sheba went to great lengths to hear Solomon, she travelled from “the ends of the earth”. These Pharisees refused to be impressed when confronted with someone greater than Solomon. The tragedy is that they had all the signs and more, they had the Son of Man, the Messiah standing with them, yet they refused to believe; in fact they actively opposed and plotted his death.

It’s impossible to be neutral with Jesus and he makes this clear with a little story about a man who had an evil spirit but it has now left him.(v.43) The evil spirit leaves the man, and wanders

around but then it returns to find the man has cleaned up his life, it's "*swept clean and in order*". But there's a vacuum. Nothing has replaced the devil. Yes, the man has sought to clean up his life, but what he needs is the Spirit of God to fill his life. The end result is that the person finishes up in a worse state than previously as seven more demons join in occupying his life. The story, directed primarily at the Pharisees, but also applying to us today, brings out the thought that the power of God is needed to defeat evil. And it hammers home the lesson that you cannot be neutral towards Jesus. If you attempt to be neutral the result will be that the equivalent of seven devils will come in, so that the person finishes in a worse state than at first. It is interesting to note that not only is the house said to be empty but it can now be said that it is "*swept clean and put in order.*" Jesus is saying that the man tries to reform his life, but with the man still thinking that he is in control of himself and with no reference to the Spirit of God. The man is empty; he is open to invasion from all kinds of evil, and in fact the original spirit comes back with reinforcements. There is no new power that would enable the man to escape being demon-ridden. And his lack of spiritual resources left him open to a worse fate than he had known previously.

As I've thought about this I'm reminded of what we learnt about the Trinity. Do you remember how In John 17 we learnt that somehow when we believe in Jesus' death and resurrection we somehow become "in Christ", we are united with God the trinity, we are in them. This is indeed an amazing privilege, but it's not like it's something we just sit back and God does it all for us. There is an active participation, a choosing to act, by us, with God, so that Paul can say to the Philippian Christians "*continue to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*" (Phil.2:12). There is a singlemindedness and purposefulness in this but Paul adds, "*for it is God who works in you to will and to act to his good purposes.*" God is working in us but we are also making choices to work with or without God.

Jesus rounds off the story by driving home the application to his hearers. "*That is how it will be with this wicked generation*", with those who were standing before him. They had seen him cast out a demon, he had disproved the suggestion that he did this by Beelzebul and had pointed out that the Spirit of God was at work in him, he had pointed out that it is unforgivable to blaspheme the holy Spirit, he had made it plain that they were in the presence of something greater than Jonah or Solomon, and he had told his little story about the man from whom the unclean spirit went out. In his casting out of the evil spirit that started this chain of events (back in v.22) Jesus had bound the strong man. Clearly, he was now pointing out the danger in which these Pharisees stood. They had been confronted with divine power, and if they tried to live empty lives, lives that did not replace evil by the presence of the Holy Spirit, there would be devastating consequences.

And now we come to the last part of this passage in v.46. Jesus' earthly family does not seem to have understood exactly who he was and what his mission demanded. John tells us that his

brothers did not believe him (John 7:5), and Mark that on one occasion his family (or perhaps his friends) tried to seize him because they thought he was beside himself (Mark 3:20-21). Maybe they were worried about what the Pharisees and other authorities might do to him. At any rate they appear to be claiming special treatment on account of their family ties, and Jesus makes it plain that in his ministry his relation to his family is different from what it had been in the days of his growing up. At the same time we must bear in mind that Jesus is not so much downgrading loyalty to a human family as insisting on the importance of loyalty to God.

When I got married I became part of George's family. Ross and Barb, George's parents, became my parents. Jesus is saying when you become my follower you come into my family. And when you think of it, this is a deeper more profound family – the family that will last for eternity. We think how wonderful it will be to see a loved one who has died, in heaven, but that will be nothing compared to seeing Jesus, our brother. Our fellowship and relationship will be far deeper than anything we could imagine here on earth. In this we have hope. I love the way Jesus uses the word "*Whoever*", meaning anyone at all; the way into his family is open wide and there are no restrictions on who may enter.

So what do we take from this? There is a seriousness about following God. For those who are sitting on the fence or rejecting Jesus these are strong warnings from Jesus. Don't be like the Pharisees and reject Jesus as the Son of Man, the one sent by God, the one who has all authority. We cannot clean ourselves up but God can change us. If you have accepted Jesus as Lord you have nothing to fear from these words of Jesus. By accepting him as Lord you are wanting him to change you. Here in this passage he calls us brothers when we follow him and obey him. We are part of his family.

As we stay at home during this lockdown it's not like our lives are on hold; you know we're thinking when the lockdown is over, when life gets back to "normal", whatever that is, then I can start following Jesus more. Right now, wherever we are, if we are his child then we are his brother or sister and each day is an opportunity to do his will. Let's actively call out to Jesus; how would you have me live, lord? What do you have for me today?

(This chapter has drawn attention to a variety of ways in which Jesus was opposed. Matthew has made it clear that his Lord faced constant and bitter and unjustified hostility from people who ought to have been giving him a welcome. Even Jesus' own family did not understand him. But the chapter ends with the firm reminder that there were those who, despite all the opposition, committed themselves wholeheartedly to Jesus.)