

**Reflection on Mark 3:20–35**  
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Mark's Gospel is set against a backdrop of conflict and turmoil. No sooner does Jesus begin his ministry of hospitality and healing when the religious leaders—and even members of his family—start questioning, scrutinising and plotting to bring an end to this new thing God is doing in their midst.

In today's reading, we get a sense of what the source of tension might be. The crowds are gathered around Jesus once again. "The crowds," who appear throughout this Gospel like a singular character, represent those who are curious and open. They come to Jesus to listen, observe and wonder about who he is and what his presence might mean. But they are not, according Mark's Gospel, card carrying members of the religious or social elite. In fact, the healing stories that always take place in their presence indicate they are most likely among the vulnerable, needy, neglected and rejected of society.

It is this collection of people whom Jesus indicates are his *real family*, his sisters and brothers and mother who make up his *true household*. The crowd is doing the will of God by drawing near to Jesus. They may share neither blood nor creed, but they sense that Jesus is a gift from God and they welcome the love and life he brings. This seems like good news. So why the tension and conflict? Why are some concerned that Jesus has "gone out of his mind"? or even worse, that he is harbouring a demon?

Well, the image of Jesus sitting in the midst of this ragamuffin crowd and his affirming gesture challenge the assumed understanding of the *ties that matter*. Jewish culture and the Greco-Roman society of Jesus' day were built upon familial bonds—blood, marriage contracts and inheritance. These ties, like today, determine identity and status and, most importantly, ensure wealth and influence are kept in the family.

Jesus upended the status quo. As local Catholic theologian Michael Trainor puts it, "The mission of Jesus was to reveal God's communion with humanity and creation." It's as easy and challenging as that, for Jesus embodied a love that moves well-beyond ordinary loyalties and family tribalism. God's reconciling love is always seeking to open our eyes and hearts to the world outside familiar connections, especially when they limit our compassion and generosity or are themselves self-serving.

For instance, we might applaud this week's decision by G7 leaders to pledge 1 billion COVID vaccine doses to poorer countries. But Oxfam's Health Policy Manager Anna Marriot notes that 11 billion doses are actually needed to end the pandemic. She says:

Dose sharing is part of the solution if done immediately, but charity is not going to fix the colossal vaccine supply crisis. In order to ramp up production, the G7 should break the pharmaceutical monopolies and insist that the vaccine science and know-how is shared with qualified manufacturers around the world.

What Marriot is calling for in this instance is a radical re-visioning and re-ordering, like the one cast for us in the Gospel; a reformation of heart and mind that leads to changes in social systems where power is shared, opportunity and resources are equally distributed, and the perspectives of all—including the earth—are part of decision making.

In a small way, the pandemic has helped us experience something of this revolution of the heart here at St. Andrew's. We were forced to look beyond familiar ways of doing things which made room to discover the all-embracing communion of God in our midst.

A prime example is the way we serve food on Tuesday nights. It made sense functionally for volunteers to stand behind the counter while guests cued up to receive their soup. But the need for physical distancing made this more difficult. Plus, in talking with the Tuesday night community, there was a shared desire to be closer to one another—especially during lockdown when we longed for the comfort of human interaction and friendship.

So now, volunteers provide table service—first the soup, then the main meal. It is an opportunity to speak face-to-face, to interact and get to know one another's names and stories.

Last Tuesday I watched as one of the volunteers made his way around the tables after the meal had been served. He knelt next to chairs or across the table from those who were eating, leaning in, listening intently, gently removing a used plate or bowl as he made his way around the room. It is a beautiful image of who we are becoming.

Then on Thursday, one of our community members brought his mum in for a cup of coffee and to meet us. Though experiencing homelessness at times and couch surfing at others, this friend realises that he is part of the household here at St. Andrew's. It warmed my heart that he wanted us to meet his mum and hopefully it brought her comfort to see how cherished her son is by us.

Both of these stories demonstrate how being genuine Christian community can dissolve barriers and strengthen the human ties that exist between us regardless of our background or present circumstance. It is these human ties that form the foundation of a more just, compassionate and sustainable society for they enable us *to relate and see and care* beyond societal groupings and identities. This seeing and caring beyond charity lead to the gentle revolution of the heart needed as we hope and pray for a new future.

In her reflection on this passage, Anglican priest Sarah Bachelard points out that the difference between Jesus' family and the crowd is a matter of placement and viewpoint. Those who worry Jesus has gone out of his mind stand at a distance, they are outside the household looking in, analysing, critiquing, questioning. They judge from a place of distance and therefore according to the standards and values of the culture in which they are immersed. No wonder they think Jesus has gone mad!

In contrast, "the crowd" gathers around Jesus. They recognise the liberating love before them and give themselves to what God seems to be on about. Most importantly, they are witnessing the works of Jesus *from the inside*. Their nearness to Jesus enables them to see and experience firsthand *his worldview*—to see as God sees—and this makes all the difference.

The invitation, then, is to step inside, to draw near to the Source of healing, inclusive, transforming love and to allow ourselves to be changed. From this place within the household of God, we come to recognise all people as kin and all creation as dearly loved by God.