

# JESUS IS ACCUSED

## MARK 3: 20-30

Justice & Righteousness Series

### OPENING PRAYER

As we gather, we bring to God all that we are – our hopes and fears, our joys and pains, our truths and lies; trusting that God welcomes us just as we are, and works with us. Amen.

### EXEGESIS

This is one of the most difficult episodes in the Bible! What is going on? I'm using a particular commentary to help explore it (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*). As Myers identifies this episode as central to Jesus' mission (his book-title derives from it), it is worth wrestling with. Two things to note first: 1) Early on in Mark's Gospel, Jesus has already caused a stir, and investigators from Jerusalem have come to assess his threat (v. 22). 2) Some of the dialogue is 'apocalyptic' – an exaggerated way of speaking that is 'revelatory' of God's purposes in a political context, and which needs unpacking.

Jesus has gone home, but the people cannot eat (v. 20). He is already upsetting the normal expectations of 'table fellowship': the traditional social 'order' is being shaken. Even his family try to restrain him, fearful for his well-being; and 'people' (not least the Jerusalem investigators) are calling him names – a common tactic to discredit someone who is causing trouble- like 'Beelzebul' (lord of the demons).

So the context is highly political – there are conflicting agendas and ideologies, and the stakes are high: how should the authorities interpret and deal with this Rabbi? He replies in parables, and even his 'parables' are part of this political context – not nice moral stories, but tools for exposing the political interests of the elite. He says, basically, 'If I am Satan, then this is a battle between Satan and Satan!' That is to say, he understands the Jerusalem elite in satanic terms (satan is an 'obstacle to' or 'opponent of' God's purposes). He elaborates on this, by talking in terms of a kingdom divided (the Jerusalem elite understood themselves as the continuation of the Davidic kingdom) or a house divided (the Temple was known as 'the house'). Alluding to the apocalyptic picture of one who comes 'like a thief at night', he identifies himself as the burglar who must bind the strong man of the house (the guardians of the Establishment).

Then, seemingly unconnected, he says that all sins are forgivable, except any blasphemy against the Holy Spirit! But there is a link: for the Temple exercises the mandate to forgive sins. Jesus is wrenching this mandate away, and declaring blanket forgiveness, undermining the Temple's purity code. The only unforgivable sin is the misnaming of God's work: in other words, to call 'godly' what is actually Satan's work, and to label satanic what is God's work. The confrontation with the Temple is clear.

## REFLECTION

The British theologian, Andrew Shanks, identifies key ways in which we are inclined to be 'dishonest'. One of the ways is how gangs or 'powers-that-be' manipulate us with propaganda, in order to urge us to behave ourselves, making it possible for some people to be scapegoated/sacrificed along the way. This episode from Mark's Gospel illustrates this. It is a battle between the establishment's propaganda (calling Jesus names) and his counter- or anti-propaganda, which exposes the lie of the system and how it aims to divide us from each other, when God's grace and forgiveness is for all.

The crunch will come, when the System seeks to silence Jesus definitively, by crucifying him – the ultimate propaganda tool – to put an end to his exposure of its lies. But even that will be exposed and overcome: God, in Christ, will share in solidarity with the victims of the propaganda-regime, and will rise to new life, in defiance of it!

So, what of propaganda-regimes in our day – the dishonest systems which call people names, which create scapegoats, which tries to silence truth-telling? Is Christ beckoning us to stand in solidarity with victims of this system, and to denounce its divisive lies?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the dominant propaganda of today's world, and who are the scapegoats of the system's lies?
2. How might we stand in solidarity with the victims of the system, to expose the lies and tell the truth instead?
3. How might we 'bind the strong man' in today's world – namely, restrain the powers-that-be (whoever they are) in order to nurture God's work of justice and liberation?

## CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, I pray that you would open my eyes to see the signs of your kingdom around me. Give me eyes to see you in unexpected places, and a heart to welcome you when you come in unfamiliar ways. Amen.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man- A Political Reading of Mark's Gospel*, Orbis Books (1988)
- Andrew Shanks, *God and modernity: a new and better way to do theology*, London: Routledge (2000)
- Jung Mo Sung, *Desire, Market and Religion*, London: SCM (2007)