

In the Gospel for today we encounter people expressing a couple of different opinions about Jesus. One is a temporary misunderstanding about him. The other is a hardened rejection of Jesus.

Now by extension what people think about Jesus will also shape what they think about his followers. And so today as we see people expressing these negative views about Christ, realise that people will have similar negative views about his own. And we need to be prepared for this. People will say these kind of things about us. But at the same time, there is another opinion about Jesus' followers that we will discover in our Gospel. Now the question for us is, whose opinion do we put more stock in? Whose view do we pay more attention to? It makes a world of difference.

The first opinion about Jesus that we find in our Gospel is that of his own family members. Now you would think that Jesus' own family members would be so proud of him, as he goes about blessing people and healing their diseases and so on. "That's our boy!" you would think they would say. But no. Here's what it says: "Then [Jesus] went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, 'He is out of his mind.'" "He's out of his mind," they say. His own family. They think he's gone crazy. He's gone over the edge. They're thinking, "You're acting like a crazy person!"

But is he? Or is he really in his right mind, and it's others who do not get it? I think that's the case. That's certainly the viewpoint of the Bible. Jesus' mindset is the right one. Jesus came to do the will of God, he had in mind the things of God, not the things of men. Man's mindset is to serve oneself, to look out for #1, or a common phrase I hear more and more- "to have your best life now". But Jesus said he came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross—knowing that that is what it would take to accomplish the mission on which he was sent, to redeem sinful humanity and to usher in the kingdom of God. And that meant bestowing the blessings of the kingdom even early on in his ministry—preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons, forgiving sins—the very things he is busy doing in our Gospel for today. Oh, I'd say Jesus is in his right mind, very much so! Wouldn't you?

But his family members don't get that, at least not yet. We read elsewhere that his own brothers did not believe in him at this time. Of course, that would change later on. Jesus' brothers would believe in him. In fact, a couple of them became prominent leaders in the early church, James and Jude did. But not yet. At this time they are still operating with the mindset of the world, and so they think Jesus is acting a bit off his head.

Now by extension, if people think this way about Jesus, it's likely they will think similar thoughts about Jesus' followers. And that continues to this day. Maybe you've experienced some of this. Maybe even from members of your own family. Have people ever thought you're a bit crazy for spending so much time at church? Do they think you've gone a little overboard on religion? Do they look at you a bit funny because you're not available for other activities on Sunday mornings, or because you don't let your kids participate in sport on Sunday mornings since that time is reserved for God?

See, people today who don't get it may say the same thing about you as they said about Jesus: "He's out of his mind." "She's way too much into religion." "They are hypocrites." But see, this is just a way and excuse for them to distance themselves from the call of God on their lives. God would call

them to repentance and to faith also. But that can make people uncomfortable. And you remind them of that. So they may have some negative opinions about you. Well, get used to it. It comes with the territory. So be it.

So the first opinion we find in our Gospel directed toward Jesus, and which also can apply to his followers, is “He’s out of his mind.” The second opinion about Jesus that is expressed is even more hostile: “He is possessed by Beelzebul,” or, in other words, “He is demon-possessed.” That’s what some of Jesus’ opponents were saying about him. Our Gospel states: “And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, ‘He is possessed by Beelzebul,’ and ‘by the prince of demons he casts out demons.’”

These opponents were accusing Jesus of being in league with the devil himself. They are really grasping at straws here. To imagine that Jesus is able to cast out demons by being given power by the devil—as though this is some sort of subtle trickery Jesus is doing in order to deceive people—well, that just doesn’t make any sense on the face of it. And Jesus says so: “How can Satan cast out Satan?”

No, the truth is, Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil. He came to bind the strong man and to plunder his goods. He came to deliver poor souls from the devil’s oppression and to bring them over into the kingdom of God.

When Jesus said, “It is finished,” it really was. The devil’s end, his crushing defeat, was accomplished. The goal had been reached. Satan has no more room to make accusation against you, because your sin has been forgiven by Jesus’ blood. And with sins forgiven, death is undone. The risen Christ holds the keys of death and Hades. Jesus is the stronger man who has bound the strong man, the devil, and plundered his house. Forgiveness, freedom, and final resurrection are yours in Christ.

So in spite of these negative evaluations about Jesus, and likewise about his followers, there is one opinion we haven’t considered yet. And that is Jesus’ opinion of those who come to listen to him. We read in our Gospel “And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you.’ And he answered them, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.’”

Now it is Jesus’ opinion about his followers—that is the only opinion that counts. That is the one we should pay attention to; that is the one we should put stock in and heed—what Jesus says about us, not what the world says about us. And what Jesus says is this. He says that those people who come to listen to him, to gather around him, to be ministered to by him—Jesus says of us: “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.” And so when we do come here and receive from our Saviour, Jesus says we are really his true family. He calls us his brothers and sisters. I’d say that’s pretty good. And frankly, I’d put more stock in what Jesus says than in what the world says. Every day of the week, and twice on Sundays.

There was a time in our culture when it was important to be identified as a member of a church. It was the respectable, acceptable thing to do. For many it was the place where one socialised, played sport, met your partner, had your kids attend Sunday school and later youth activities, and all those

things were good in and of themselves, but were not necessarily connected to the core business of the Church for many, and when those social ties diminished owing to large changes in society it quickly evaporated- the pews started to empty for most churches. While it was recent enough that some of us can still remember it, things have continued to change drastically. We can lament this change, talk about how terrible it is, and find all kinds of things to blame it on, or we can take advantage of the situation. In a time when people no longer just turn up in churches because it is the thing to do, we are given the opportunity to bring them in by offering them a relationship with God and understand that will be in much smaller numbers. What we have seen as a breakdown may actually be a breakthrough as we find a chance to offer people something beyond just belonging to “the family” by offering them the opportunity to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

Always in the Church, and I mean always, the discussion revolves around the question of how we can grow the size of a congregation. This is the wrong question. It is not about growing the size of the family, the congregation, but rather about how we can help people do the will of God. Our goal should not be to make sure that a congregation survives but that the reign of God is spread throughout the world. Although we may have emotional links to a particular congregation, it is not our organisational survival that matters in the end, but, rather, whether we are able to reach people with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes one hears the objection that the congregation can't reach others if it isn't here and that is true, but the reign of God does not depend on one particular congregation existing. These days when asked how many people attend our church- I reply 85 million! We know this, being members of the third largest Christian denomination in the world. Ultimately it depends on those Christians and us who are a part of the whole Anglican family being faithful in the best way we possibly can.

Many of us have been involved in organisations that were dying. It may have been a Rotary, Lions, Cubs, Guides, or any of a number of other social and sporting groups. If you have been there you know what it is like to have the focus shift from the work of the group to the survival of the group and the negative manifestations that inevitably arise. People are sought out not because the organisation can help that person or because that person can contribute to the mission of the group but rather because they are a warm body who hopefully has some money to spare and when these people become a significant proportion of the congregation in - build a fatal fragility.

This may come as shocking surprise but we need to reach people not because they will help us but because we need to help them. It is not about enlarging the family so it can survive, but rather it is about helping others to know the joy of a relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

There are all kinds of programs and special campaigns that congregations can run to try to draw in crowds. In evaluating them, however, we need to keep in mind that our goal is to make disciples of Jesus Christ and not perpetuate or enlarge an organisation. We are about the work of inviting people to come and do the will of God for their lives and for the life of the world. We have the way to a full and abundant life that offers meaning and hope to a world gone mad. When we do that- above all else- then we will know that we have truly become the mother, brother, and sister of Jesus.

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