

Pentecost, 7B

Readings, 2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10, Psalm 48 2 Corinthians 12:2-10, Mark 6:1-13

Dangerous Faith: Confronting the Demons

Introduction

There is an extra-canonical saying, that is one not included in the New Testament, but nevertheless, of considerable authenticity. Jesus says this:

*"Whoever is close to me, is close to the fire;
whoever is far from me, is far from the Kingdom."*

The point of Jesus' saying is that the act of following him is dangerous; as dangerous as fire. That the Gospel, the vision of the kingdom – if we are serious about it – promises to set us alight, to consume us.

These last weeks, we have been reading about the inflaming capacity of faith. We have learnt that the Gospel tells us that we do not live in a neutral world, but that the kingdom in which we are enlisted to serve, is all about challenging the demons, the powers that make life a 'living death', a living hell. These last weeks, we have listened to stories that challenge these death-dealing demons and powers. Last week we heard about the bleeding woman, the woman with fistula, who has suffered the weight of a double burden: illness from the powers or demons of nature, and discrimination at the hands of religious tradition, which casts her as "impure", sullied, dirty, which casts her out. What we discovered in this reading was that this woman courageously refuses to accept such a ruling, this woman, challenges both nature and religious institutions, this woman understands that faith is not about theological content, tradition, doctrine or rules, but about the personal healing experience of God. In so doing she understands how dangerous faith can be, how close to the fire of conflict it may bring you with authority.

The Reading

Today, we find another chapter in Mark's story-telling: this time about family: and be warned, it is not a radiant, carefree 'take'. In this reading there are really two stories that are closely connected; the first, is about family and the second about Jesus' sending his apostles out to mission, with nothing but the power of the Spirit. Seldom are the connections between these stories drawn, but they should be. So let's do it!

Let's begin with the second part, the sending out of the apostles to mission. *"Don't take anything with you on the trip except a walking stick – no bread, no beggar's bag, no money in your pockets. ⁹Wear sandals, but don't carry an extra shirt."* The point here is this: that being inflamed by the Spirit, means to live freely, to let-go of the usual securities and anxieties that mark our lives. The insight is that only having let-go of those things that *possess us*, can we live generously, not having it both ways, not "hedging our bets". The perception is one that Jesus mentions in other places as well, especially the Sermon on the Mount: one cannot serve two masters: security and the kingdom.

But what has this call to evangelical freedom got to do with the first story about family? The answer is quite simple: everything! In the ancient world, as still in many parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America, family is more than just a biological unit; rather it is a social and economic one. It was through the family that security was assured. It was through the family that wealth was cultivated. It was through the correct marrying-off of children that

connections and networks were fostered, creating dynasties and even greater concentration of power. In our story, this is the assumed world-view of Jesus' opponents. To the question "Who is he"? comes the answer "no-body". And why? Because his family are no-bodies. Jesus after all is illegitimate, for there is no father: he is only "the Son of Mary". Hebrew custom always named the son as fruit of the father. He would have been "Son of Joseph"...but he isn't.

Behind this story then, lies an implicit and explicit Gospel attack upon family: not family *per se*, not family in itself, but family when it becomes a power, a demon, leading to the exclusion, diminishment and destruction of genuine community. The fact that Jesus is a no-body from no-where, is something that Mark's Gospel celebrates and instils in the memory and consciousness of the early Christian community. For Mark this is to be a badge-of-honour for the Church, a memory they must carry with them, as they build the kingdom on earth. The Church is a *counter-family to the demonic one; the Church is a family that serves not dominates, that includes not excludes.*

Conclusion

In these past weeks as the readings have focused our attention upon following Jesus, upon discipleship, we have heard that the kingdom is about challenging the powers, the demons within a world that is not neutral. These demons have included the violence of nature – the storm; the violence of illness, the violence of religion when it declares people "impure", excluding them – the bleeding woman. And today we have heard about the demonic face of the family, when it is used, *not* for purposes of hospitality and inclusion, but for wealth power and segregation. The Gospel of the kingdom, challenges them all and the point is the same: to confront the demons is dangerous. Next week this theme of a non-neutral world, of powers and demons which must be confronted in the name of the Gospel continues.

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