

The 10th Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Genesis 3:9-15
<i>Response</i>	With the Lord there is mercy, and fullness of redemption.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 130:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Now the ruler of the world will be driven out, says the Lord; and when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 3:20-35

The Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through the Gospel of Mark, and it brings us to a very fascinating passage from that Gospel that gives us an account of the conflict that took place in Jesus' hometown over his exorcisms that he was performing. And it's in the context of that controversy that Jesus gives one of his most enigmatic sayings. It's the saying about the unforgivable sin, the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. So today's gospel we're going to look at this controversy over Jesus' exorcism and the unforgivable sin and we'll try to unpack how the church understands this very strange and difficult passage and how the church has interpreted it in light of the living tradition. So, let's begin with 3:20-35 of Mark's gospel - that is the reading for today. It's kind of a long one but there's a lot going on, so it says this:

Then he [Jesus] went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. And when his friends heard it, they went out to seize him, for they said, "He is beside himself." And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Be-el'zebul, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." And he called them to him, and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end.

But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man; then indeed he may plunder his house. "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" -- for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit." And his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother."¹

Okay, there is so much going on in this passage and it's almost like three little pericopes, three little passages clustered into one. So the church has given us a lot to do for this particular Sunday. I'll do my best to walk through each of them and help put them in their original context. So let's begin with the controversy over Jesus' exorcisms. The first thing we want to highlight here is where this is taking place. It's taking place in Nazareth. We can see that from Mark's reference to Jesus' home. This would mean his hometown, right. We can also see it from the reference to those who were concerned about what Jesus was doing. So the Revised Standard Version says that when Jesus' "friends" heard about the crowds they went out to seize him because he was "beside himself." That's the Revised Standard Version's translation; other translations render it differently. The New American Bible for example says that Jesus' "relatives" went out to seize him because they thought he was "out of his mind," which is a little different than "beside himself," right. So there is a real controversy here about exactly how to translate the Greek terms, because the Greek terms are somewhat ambiguous - both the nouns and the verb there. So the original Greek expression literally means those who belong to him, *hoi par autou* in Greek. So does that mean those who belong to his family in Nazareth? Was it his extended family like his relatives? Which is what the New American Bible suggests. Was it just friends of his, right, his friends? Is that the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

implicit idea? That's how the Revised Standard Version takes it. However we interpret it, what's pretty clear is that some people from within his town that he grew up in have some concerns about all these crowds and what's taking place, and seem to think that something is amiss, there's some problem. Either he is "beside himself" or more strongly, the New American Bible puts it, he's "out of his mind," right - which is a pretty strong reaction to Jesus' exorcism. Again, it's a little unclear why they would think Jesus was out of his mind if he's casting out devils, right. So who knows what they heard; it's very mysterious; it's hard to explain it.

In any case, what is clear is that in the context of causing this controversy within his hometown and raising some questions about his ministry amongst those who knew him the Scribes and Pharisees are very specific what their concern is. They say he's possessed, meaning he's possessed by the devil. So, how do they express this? Well they say "he's possessed by Be-el'zebul, and by the prince of demons he cast out demons." Okay who is Be-el'zebul? Well, Be-el'zebul is an Aramaic term. It's rooted in the Hebrew word *baal*, which means 'Lord,' okay. And *baal* or sometimes you'll see it Be-el'zebul — you can render it differently — means 'Lord of the Flies.' And, this was a customary Aramaic name for Satan, right. If you think about Satan as the prince of death or the one who has power over death and decay — who you would associate with tombs and graves and that kind of thing — 'Lord of the Flies' is a kind of appropriate title for the prince of demons, as they call him here. So, basically what the Scribes and Pharisees are saying is, Jesus is possessed by a demonic spirit, and it's through the power of the devil that he's actually casting out demons in his exorcistic ministry. Now that is a very serious charge. That's a very serious charge. And, so Jesus responds to that accusation with basically two parables. They're short, and they're related but they're distinct.

The first parable is the parable of the two kingdoms or of the divided kingdom. And this parable is basically kind of like a logical question. What Jesus is saying is: your logic doesn't work; it doesn't make any sense. Because if I'm casting out demons by the power of Satan then that means Satan himself is casting out Satan. It means that Satan's kingdom is fighting against itself and a kingdom that fights against itself isn't going to last. It's going to fall apart. So, basically that's just his way of retorting to their accusation. Like your accusation that I'm casting out demons by the power of the devil is irrational; it doesn't make any sense. What kingdom would fight against itself, right? Now implicit in that parable is of course

the idea that there are two kingdoms: the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God. And that Christ is fighting on the side of God and that Satan's kingdom is “coming to an end,” as Jesus puts it here. Because what he's actually doing is bringing in the kingdom of God that's overthrowing the kingdom of Satan. That's kind of the implicit, positive message behind this parable of the divided kingdom — or this riddle of the divided kingdom (we might call it that). So that's Jesus' first response to the charge of possession and demonic activity.

The second response is even more curious. It's called the parable of the strong man, right. So what Jesus says is, you know, if you're going to enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods you have to tie him up first, and then you can plunder his goods. Now this is a fascinating parable because what Jesus is describing here is a thief breaking into someone else's house and taking all of his stuff, right. And what he's saying is if a thief wants to break into a strong man's house, he'd better tie the strongman up before he robs him; otherwise, the strong man's going to fight back, right. So for example, if I wanted to break into — just to use an analogy — if I wanted to break into Arnold Schwarzenegger's house and rob him I'd better tie him up first because I bet he would be able to beat me up pretty easily. Of course I guess he's getting up in years now so maybe that's not the best analogy, but you get the idea. If you we're going to break in the home of someone who was a powerful person or a strong man, you would make sure — you would take precautions to make sure that he was restrained in some way before you began taking his possessions, before you began taking his things. On the surface of it, we would usually assume, well, the thief is the bad guy and the homeowner is the good guy, right. So we might be inclined to think, oh well Jesus here would be the homeowner and, you know, the devil would be the thief, because the devil's bad. But Jesus flips it in the parable; it's an unexpected twist. In the parable, Jesus is the thief who's breaking in to steal and the strong man, the homeowner, is in fact Satan, the devil. So what he's saying here is that, the strong man is the devil; Jesus is the thief; and the goods that he wants to steal from the devil are the souls of those who are possessed. And so what Jesus is doing then is in order to take back the souls that Satan has bound he has to tie Satan up first. He has to restrain him first. That's what his exorcistic ministry is. It's binding the strong man. It's tying Satan's hands. It's restraining the power — restricting the power Satan — and winning back souls from him.

So what Jesus is doing here is kind of revealing the rationale behind his practice of casting out demons. Which, let's face it — must've been pretty shocking to those who know him, right. If you grew up in the village with Jesus — maybe you were his cousin, maybe you were a friend of his and used to play with him in the fields — and now you see him coming into the hometown and casting out demons? It's going to be shocking; it's going to be surprising. They might even cause some scandal or some concerns about it. Who is this guy? What's he doing? Why is all this taking place around him? So Jesus is explaining it here. He's telling us the reasons for his exorcism. It's all part of the battle. It's a battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, between Jesus the thief and Satan the strong man. And Jesus as a thief has come — ironically enough — he's come as a thief to rob Satan blind. He wants to steal it all back; he wants it all back; he wants every human soul back from the power and the dominion of Satan. And that's what he's going to do in his public ministry.

And that leads to the second part. Or, actually it's the third part. The third part of his response to the accusation of him being possessed is this whole statement about blaspheming the Holy Spirit. And Jesus very famously says here: you know, whatever blasphemies men utter — and human beings utter countless blasphemies every day — whatever blasphemies they utter, whatever sins they might commit — all of it can be forgiven. But there's only one sin that can't be forgiven. It's an eternal sin Jesus says: that's the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Now if I had a dollar for every time I had someone ask me, "Dr. Pitre, what is the unforgivable sin?" right, "What's the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit," I'd be a rich man. Because it's one of those questions that lots of faithful devout Catholics who've heard this gospel read in the liturgy — they have. Primarily because if there's one unforgivable sin I'd like to know what it is so I don't commit it, right. That's kind of what's driving the question — I want to know what he means by it. And it's unclear from the context exactly what he means. So people speculate all kinds of ways about what is the sin against the Holy Spirit — what is this unforgivable sin. Mark's gospel is really significant because he's probably the one who gives us the clearest clue as to what it means in context. Because you'll notice here after Jesus utters his response Mark says, "...for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'" So Mark seems to interpret the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit to mean *calling the action of the Holy Spirit the action of the devil*, right. What did the Scribes and Pharisees just do? They saw Jesus casting out demons through the power of God — through

the power of the Holy Spirit of God — doing good in the name of God and through the power of God. And, what did they say? They said not just that it was evil but that it was demonic. So they took one of the most good and the most holy things and they called it one of the most evil and one of the most corrupt things. So they called evil good and thereby implied also that good is evil. It's completely upside down. So it's a kind of blasphemy against the action of the Holy Spirit that's being performed by Jesus. That's what most scholars think Mark means there when he says, "He has an unclean spirit." Now I'm going to come back to this at the end of the presentation about how this has been interpreted in the living tradition. But, I think that is the basic meaning in context here. In other words, *that their hearts are so hardened that when they see an action of the Holy Spirit they call it an action of the devil*. Now there's spiritual blindness and then there's *spiritual blindness*. And, these Scribes and Pharisees are completely blind to the goodness of Jesus and the holiness of his actions. That's the three part response.

The final part of this gospel we can do a whole video just on this because it's the famous account of Jesus' mother and brethren coming to him outside of the house and calling for him. And then him saying in response, "who are my mother and my brethren?" and, you know, "anyone who does the will of God, that's my brother, that's my sister, that's my mother." Several questions arise with this text. First one: a lot of scholars, a lot of commentators, will assert or assume or both that Jesus' mother and brothers had doubts about him or that they actually were the ones who said he was out of his mind. What will frequently happen is that commentators will fuse verse 31 about Jesus' mother and brothers coming and calling for him with verse 21 about his friends or relatives saying he was out of his mind. And some scholars will even go as far as to say this means that Mary thought Jesus was out of his mind. And I really do object to that interpretation for a number of reasons. First, the verse that says Jesus was beside himself or that he was out of his mind says nothing about Mary. It says nothing about his mother. It doesn't even say anything about his brothers. It says "those who were of him," *hoi par autou*. It means his relatives or his friends; it's just an ambiguous saying. So to read his mother back into that verse is very problematic. If Mark meant his mother and brothers thought he was out of his mind or he was beside himself, then why didn't he just say it, right? Why the use of two different categories of people? It seems more likely to me that it's talking about his extended relatives within his family, and that's why Mark uses the more general term — those who belong to him, or his

friends — rather than his specific term “his mother and brothers.” That’s the first problem.

The second issue is this is just a different scene. What's happening here is Jesus has finished his discourse; he's teaching in the house; and a new scene arrives, which is his mother and his brethren show up, and they ask him to come outside, okay. There’s just no problems going on here. There’s certainly no concern about Jesus' mental state or anything like that. All that has to be read into this text. It doesn't say anything about it. So I think that's a really problematic, but it’s a very popular interpretation of the text. I'm not sure — I think some people like to shock readers into thinking that Mary had doubts about Jesus, and that Mary was concerned about Jesus’ state of mind. All that is what scholars call eisegesis. You’re reading it into the text; it’s not actually there; it’s not exegesis — you’re not drawing out what the text itself says.

One last point you might notice here. In verse 31 it says, “and his mother and his brethren came” or you can translate it “and his mother and his brethren arrived; and standing outside they sent to him and called to him.” So scholars who want to say that his mother and brothers were the ones who considered him to be out of his mind have a problem, because obviously when it says that they came — when it says that they arrived — it's implying that they weren’t there before, right. So it's just, it is a misinterpretation of this verse to try to read the presence of the mother and brothers of Jesus back into the earlier verse when this verse clearly implies that they weren't already present at the preceding events. What the text says is Mary and his brothers show up, and they asked him to come out. And Jesus uses the opportunity to explain the nature of the family and the kingdom of God by saying, “who are my mother, who are my brethren, anyone who does the will of God is my brother, my sister, or my mother.”

Now another problem with this text is that people will often interpret this as Jesus disrespecting his mother. This is a favorite passage, for example, going all the way back to the Protestant Reformation, a number of the reformers would use this text to criticize Catholic devotion to Mary. What they would say is, in effect, Jesus himself, you know, disrespected his mother or put his mother in her place or relegated her to minimum status or made her equal to everyone else when he said, you know, “who is my mother and my brothers, anyone does the will of God.” So Mary

is just one more person who does the will of God. So they see this as Jesus kind of disrespecting his mother. Now without a doubt this is a surprising response, right, but it cannot be interpreted as Jesus disrespecting his mother for a number of reasons. The first reason is the Ten Commandments, right. So in Exodus 20 God comes down to Israel, fourth commandment honor your father and your mother, right. So it was a command of God to honor your father and your mother, and as a general rule we can rest assured Jesus doesn't break the commandments. I'm just throwing that out there as a suggestion. If your interpretation of a passage in the Gospels suggests that Jesus broke one of the commandments, it's probably wrong — just a rule of thumb there, okay. And for him to publicly dishonor his mother would be a violation of the Decalogue — that's just a fact. So we have to look for some other interpretation. What other interpretation can we apply this?

Well, a better explanation is that Jesus is using this moment as a teaching moment to explain the priority of obedience to God within the family of God, right. So what he's doing here is he's trying to help people understand: I'm coming into the world to establish a new family that's not based on blood relationship but that is based on a spiritual reality of obedience to the will of God. Therefore, whoever does the will of God is my brother or my sister or my mother, right. This is hard for us to our brains around but it would have been really important in an ancient Jewish context. Because what Jesus is going to do when he establishes a new covenant is basically establish a new family that's going to be based not on who your father was, or what family you belong to, or what genealogy you have, but what is your covenantal relationship to Christ himself. *The only blood that matters in the new covenant is the blood of Christ, which is what he'll give to the apostles of the Last Supper.* So far from disrespecting Mary, what he's doing here is actually showing something of which Mary is the supreme example — namely, obedience to Christ or obedience to God. Pope John Paul II talks about this in his many writings on Mary, especially his general audiences on Mary that he gave during one of the Marian years. And he points out that Mary is the supreme example of someone who obeyed God in the Annunciation. Because what does she say, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done unto me according to your word,” right. So Mary shows us what it means to be a member of the family of God. In fact, she's, in a sense, the first disciple of Jesus; she's not like any other disciple. She's the first to exemplify that obedience. So, Jesus is providing a teaching moment here to help people understand that family ties are transcendent; their being transcended by the relationships established by

him in the kingdom of God. That's the essence, that's the upshot of this whole passage.

Now you might be thinking, wait up Dr. Pitre, what about the brothers of Jesus? In this context I can actually refer you to a video that I did on the brothers of Jesus. You can watch it — it's available on YouTube for free.² And I'll take you through the arguments there for why whenever the Gospels mention the brothers of Jesus in context, what they are referring to are not the children of Mary but rather his cousins, his close relatives. According to an ancient Jewish custom — a biblical custom of referring to close relatives — especially of blood cousins as *adelphoi* (“brothers”) or *adelphē* (as “sisters”). This was common in the Old Testament; it's common in ancient Judaism; and it's something that we easily misunderstand but which would've been understood within a First Century Jewish context. And so Jesus takes the opportunity of having his mother and his cousins show up at this house in Nazareth to teach this principle of the priority of obedience in the family of the kingdom of God.

Okay that was a lot. What about the first reading? Alright let's go back real quick and I'll just try to briefly highlight something in the readings for today. The first reading might catch you off guard. It is the story of the fall of Adam and Eve — Genesis 3:9-15. Why is this here? Let's see if we can figure it out. In Genesis chapter [3, verse] 9, right after Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, we read these words:

But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate." The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals;

² Watch *Did Jesus Have Brothers? A Fresh Look at the Evidence* at <https://catholicproductions.com/blogs/blog/the-brothers-of-jesus-a-fresh-look-at-the-evidence>

upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

Now why in the world is this the first reading for the 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time? What's the connection between this passage from Genesis and the account of Jesus' exorcistic ministry in Mark 3? I think the clue is the last verse there, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed — he will strike your head and you will strike his heel." The Hebrew word there *suph* is probably better translated as "strike" than "bruise." So, the image there is of a battle between the serpent and the seed of a woman, right. And in this battle the serpent's head is going to be crushed. So, what does that have to do with Jesus' ministry? It's real simple. In the Bible, the Book of Revelation interprets the serpent as an image of Satan. And, of course the seed of the woman is an image for the Messiah, the future Savior, who is going to come and destroy the works of Satan by crushing his head, right. So, it's like a symbolic depiction of a battle between the son of Mary and Satan. Well, that's what's taking place in Mark chapter 3. Jesus' exorcisms are, in a sense, the fulfillment of this prophecy from Genesis 3 about a battle between the serpent and the seed of a woman. In which this son of Eve, or in this case the son of Mary, is going to be at war with the serpent and will eventually crush the head of the serpent — ultimately through the cross but also through his exorcistic ministry that we see depicted in Mark 3. So, I just say that in this case what's taking place is that Genesis 3 is like a cryptic prophecy of the spiritual warfare that's going to be played out in the public ministry of Jesus especially in his exorcisms. Alright, and that's the connection between the Old and the New Testaments for today.

In closing, I'd like to just close here. So much for one video, but I just want to close with a few last points about the sin against the Holy Spirit. The reason I'd like to do this is because John Paul II — St. John Paul II — wrote an entire encyclical on the Holy Spirit called *Dominum et Vivificantem*. This came out in the 1980's and it's so beautiful — it's difficult, it's tough reading at points — but it's a beautiful encyclical on the person of the Holy Spirit; it's published in 1986. And, in paragraph 46 John Paul II gives an authoritative papal interpretation of the sin against the Holy Spirit, and I think it's really important for us to listen to his words.

So, I'll close with these words from John Paul II. What is the sin against the Holy Spirit? What is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? Here's what St. John Paul II said:

“[B]lasphe^my" does not properly consist in offending against the Holy Spirit in words; it consists rather in *the refusal to accept the salvation which God offers to man through the Holy Spirit...* [T]he blasphemy against the Holy Spirit consists precisely in *the radical refusal to accept this forgiveness*, of which he is the intimate giver and which presupposes the genuine conversion which he brings about in the conscience. *If Jesus says that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven either in this life or in the next, it is because this "non-forgiveness" is linked, as to its cause, to "non-repentance," in other words to the radical refusal to be converted.* ...Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, then, is the sin committed by the person who claims to have a "right" to persist in evil— in any sin at all—and who thus rejects Redemption. One closes oneself up in sin, thus making impossible one's conversion, and consequently the remission of sins, which one considers not essential or not important for one's life... This is what Sacred Scripture usually calls “hardness of heart.” In our own time this attitude of mind and heart is perhaps reflected in the loss of the sense of sin... Pope Pius XII had already declared that “the sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin,” and this loss goes hand in hand with the “loss of the sense of God.”

So what's John Paul saying there? Same thing the Catechism actually says in paragraph 1864 — that the sin of the Holy Spirit against the Holy Spirit is ultimately *the sin of hardness of heart; it's impenitence*. It's where our hearts are so hardened against God that we refuse to accept the forgiveness that the Holy Spirit wants to offer to us. That's the only sin that can't be forgiven because it's the sin that refuses to accept forgiveness. And, it's expressed through the image of hardness of heart. And, I think that's a really powerful insight into what's happening in Mark chapter 3. How is it possible that the Scribes and Pharisees could see the work of Jesus Christ and say it was from the devil? The only explanation that really makes any sense is that their hearts were hardened to the spirit of God. Their hearts were so hardened that when they saw the action of the Holy Spirit they called it the action of the devil. They were in that state of impenitence and hardness of heart where

they refused the very redemption that God was bringing to them in Jesus Christ. And so I think that's a real sober warning for all of us. On the one hand, it's kind of a relief that the unforgivable sin isn't any one particular thing we can do — all those things can be forgiven through God's grace. On the other hand, it's a warning to us not to let our hearts grow hard. Not to refuse the grace that God wants to give us and not to become so immersed in sin that when we see good we call it evil, and when we see evil we call it good. That's a dangerous, dangerous place to be in and as John Paul II is saying there, it's really the situation of the modern world. It really hangs on a precipice, because our day in time is really characterized by a loss of the very sense of sin. And, I think that that is why, in the wisdom of the church, if you pray the liturgy of the hours one of the prayers that the priests and religious people who pray the liturgy of the hours every day they will open with one of the Psalms it says, "If today you hear his voice harden not your heart." So, the image there is always asking God to give us the grace to have open hearts so that when we see the work of God — when we see the work of the Holy Spirit — we can recognize it for what it is.