

Out of his mind?

The Christian author C.S. Lewis in one of his writings in defence of Christianity has a passage where he considers Christ's claim to be the Son of God, endowed with divine authority. 'Was Christ who he claimed to be?' is the question Lewis grapples with, and he concludes that if he was not, if he was wrong, then he was either – quote – 'a lunatic – on the level of a man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of hell.' In other words, given the things Jesus said about himself, if he was not the Son of God then he was either mad or bad – according to Lewis those are the only options. Now, I don't actually agree that those are the only possibilities, but 'mad' or 'bad' seem to be the two options that are presented in our reading from Mark this morning.

Firstly there is the 'mad' verdict, voiced by Jesus' family, among others. We read that when his family heard about the crowds following Jesus, 'they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.''' And the original word used for Jesus being 'out of his mind' means being beside himself, out of himself, detached from his true self – in other words 'mad' or 'insane', though we have come far enough nowadays to no longer use that terminology and we would prefer to speak of mental illness. And the original Greek word that is used there for 'restrain' is a very strong one. It suggests that his family considered that what we would nowadays call 'an intervention' was necessary and that considerable force might be needed, such was Jesus' danger to himself and to others.

There is, however, also the bad option, the possibility that Jesus was evil, 'the devil of Hell' as Lewis puts it. And this is the verdict of the religious establishment. This is the conclusion of the scribes who came down from Jerusalem and accused him of casting out demons by the Beelzebul, the prince of demons. And Jesus is not immediately concerned to refute this charge and to defend himself. He merely points out that even if he is the devil incarnate then his casting out of demons shows that Satan's Kingdom is divided against itself, and either way it is falling apart and its end has come. He does, however, go on to give these scribes a warning that has troubled Christians ever since, though in fact it is quite obvious and straightforward. He warns that if you conclude that he is evil and possessed then it becomes impossible to receive forgiveness.

And that surely makes sense, for forgiveness is not something that is available from one who is evil or demon possessed. And if you decide therefore that Jesus is evil then you close the door that leads to salvation

This morning, however, I want to pursue the ‘mad’ accusation for a while for it intrigues me that this is what some people concluded about Jesus. I wonder, what was it that made some people think that Jesus was mentally ill? What was it that made them decide that he needed restraining and even taking by force? And the first thing to recognise is that there can sometimes be a fine line between religious experience and mental illness. Go back to some of the prophets of the Old Testament: think of Isaiah who wandered about preaching naked and barefoot for three years – three years! – in order to make a point. What did people think of him? Or there was Jeremiah who wore an oxen yoke around his neck to convey his message, refusing to take it off. What did they make of him? Or think of the visions described by prophets like Ezekiel – strange visions that could easily be interpreted as the product of a disturbed mind. And so also with some of the saints and mystics of history. Last week one of you drew my attention to a 14th century English mystic by the name of Margery Kempe who wrote what many consider to have been the first autobiography in the English language. Her book describes her conversations with God and Jesus, her many visions and other sensory phenomena such as smells and the hearing of strange sounds. She tells of hearing a heavenly melody that made her want to weep and to live a life of chastity (though the fact that she had fourteen children may have had something to do with that). But what are we to conclude? And it may be unfair to doubt this woman’s experience, but I have known people who have been suffering from schizophrenia and who have reported religious visions and experiences – so where do you draw the line?

Now, once you start raising questions like this about what constitutes mental illness you also find yourself wondering about who is truly sane and what makes for sanity anyway. Some years ago there was a vogue in the medical field for what was known as ‘anti-psychiatry’, associated with people like the Scottish psychiatrist R D Laing. Laing was a very controversial figure, not least in his views that it is actually society that is insane and that mental illness is simply a response to its ‘madness’. Thus Laing famously said, quote, that ‘insanity is a perfectly understandable reaction to the madness of society’ – that what we call psychosis is ‘a perfectly rational adjustment to an insane

world'. In other words, those we regard as mentally ill are simply trying to come to terms with a dysfunctional world. Now, one does not need to agree with Laing on very much and there are many who do not, but surely he is right to question the sanity of the world we live in. He is surely right to remind us that the mentally ill may be out of kilter – but out of kilter with what, for society is not exactly sane.

To take one example – this past week world news has been dominated by a story about a game that involves a round leather ball, the aim of which is to kick the said ball into a net. Now, it seems that this game rules the planet. Mind-boggling sums of money are invested in it and, it appears, equally mind-boggling sums are misappropriated and used corruptly to influence governments and individuals to promote it. We heard of one high ranking official last week who has been using his corrupt, ill-gotten gains to finance a luxury penthouse apartment for his cat. Vast power and wealth accumulate around this game and it is not unusual for its exponents, people who are well-skilled in the art of kicking that leather bladder around, to be paid eye-watering sums of money every week, sums that could build hospitals and eradicate disease and provide drinking water for all. And we ask, 'where is sanity?' And we could go on: it appears evident, for example, that the unsustainable way we live is slowly killing the planet and yet we continue relentlessly in our harmful habits; and we show no signs of disengaging from our age-old, self-destructive love affair with violence. And we ask, 'where is sanity?' 'Who are the insane?' And this is in no way to belittle the reality and the tragedy and the misery of mental illness. Not at all. But it is to raise deeper questions about sanity and where it is to be found and what it looks like.

And along comes Jesus. Along comes the one who embodies the truth about the world, the truth about life, the truth about God. Along comes this Jesus who is wisdom personified. Along he comes, full of grace and truth. And he comes to us, to our twisted, dysfunctional world, and he sets about putting us right. He sets about twisting us back into shape. Now, tell me – is he going to fit in? Is he going to be at home here? Is he going to come across as 'normal' – when 'normality' is so dysfunctional? No wonder they concluded he was out of his mind! And maybe there is something that the church needs to learn here. We need to learn that the more we truly live out the Gospel, the more at odds we may find ourselves with the way the world works, and the more we will become aware that we don't fit! St Paul is our reading from 1st Corinthians this

morning talks about the foolishness of the Gospel which is forever at odds with the so-called wisdom of the world. Indeed we could slightly alter the wording of that passage so that it reads like this: ‘For the message of the cross is madness to those who are perishing... for since the world did not know God through its wisdom, God decided, through the madness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.’ In other words this life of the Kingdom to which we are called to, this life of the Kingdom that Jesus lived so powerfully, this Kingdom life that proclaims a 1st century crucified criminal as Lord of all, is not just going to appear foolish but downright insane.

But furthermore, that sense that we don’t quite fit will put us alongside others who don’t fit either. We will keep interesting company. This of course is what we see in Jesus’ ministry, that he had this affinity, this solidarity with the misfits, the oddballs who didn’t fit in either. Back in chapter 2 of Mark we find Jesus sitting at dinner with tax collectors and sinners and social outcasts and this scandalised the scribes and Pharisees who concluded that he was bad. In other words Jesus was a misfit amongst misfits. He didn’t want to spend time with his family – these were the people Jesus was at home with, not his family. His family wanted to take him away from them! And of course when you keep the kind of company Jesus kept you see the world differently. When you are a FIFA Executive flying around the world in private planes and renting luxurious apartments for you cat then you see the world in a particular way. But when you work in refugee camps, or with the sick and the homeless and the mentally ill, you see it differently – you understand it better.

Spend time with the poor and you recognise the poverty of our politics.

Spend time with the disabled and you realise how disabling or society can be.

Spend time with the mentally ill and you recognise the insanity of our world.

Spend time with Margery Kempe and you may find yourself hearing the music of heaven.

So, they thought Jesus was out of his mind. No wonder. What do you expect? Live the Gospel faithfully and they’ll think you’re out of your mind too. Live the Gospel faithfully and you won’t fit. But you’ll be in good company because there are a lot of others out there who don’t fit either. Keep close to them – and

you might just find yourself seeing the world through the eyes of Jesus.
Amen.

O gracious and loving God,
we think today of Jesus, of whom it was said
that he was out of his mind.
And we pray today for those who suffer from mental illness,
for those who struggle with depression,
for those whose mental state leads them
to harm themselves or to harm others.
O God bless those who work to bring healing,
for the medical services, and for counsellors,
for those organisations who campaign
and represent the mentally ill.

And we pray for a more compassionate
and a more understanding society.

We pray for those gripped by addiction,
for those whose lives are captive to
powers beyond their control.

And we give thanks for organisations like
Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous
and we pray for their work, that they may offer
the support and the companionship and challenge
that will offer new beginnings.

O God we pray for those of our fellowship in special need, remembering
especially the Oudshorn Hobbo family
as they gather in the USA to say goodbye to Christa's mother
and to release her to you.

God be in their midst.

And in a moment of silence we remember
anyone else on our hearts today,
and especially any who would gather with us around this table
but who are prevented by sickness of infirmity...

O God hear these and all our prayers,
For we pray in the name of Jesus Christ,
our Lord and saviour. Amen