

A Reflection from Revd Ali for Sunday 6th June ~ Trinity 1

Congratulations! Congratulations on being counter cultural. Congratulations for being different. By being here this morning, you are one of just 5%* of the UK who will attend church this morning. Being different from those around us, whether that's our families, colleagues or the people where we live, has always been a challenge. We all like to fit in. But you have made it today. You have defied expectations of what Sunday morning looks like for the majority of the UK. I hope you realise and value just how radical and counter cultural you are!

Our readings today are all about defying expectations and embracing the counter cultural message of Jesus Christ. In the epistle, St Paul was writing to the fledgling church in Corinth. They needed encouragement to stay true to their calling to follow the way of the risen Lord. So Paul encourages them to forget about the expectations of the world that values success measured in monetary terms and focus on the greater prize. In verse 16 he reminds the Corinthians that "outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day." By following the path of Christ their contemporary troubles are just momentary. The difficulties that they are experiencing are for a greater good. Living out, and sharing the message of God's love expressed through Jesus Christ, might make them seem unacceptable to their peers but their work and witness will gain eternal glory. Their earthly habitation may be destroyed but they have the promise, through Jesus Christ, of eternal life in heaven.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus was also defying expectations and cultural norms. Mark tells us that at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus' family just want him to behave like an oldest son should behave. By looking after his widowed mother and his younger siblings. They didn't, at that time, understand or accept the path he had to take. They didn't have the knowledge that Jesus had. They hadn't been there when Jesus had been baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan. They hadn't seen the Holy Spirit descend onto Jesus like a dove. Or heard the voice from heaven declaring Jesus to be God's son, whom God loved. They hadn't been with him in the desert where Jesus spent 40 days and 40 nights being tempted by the evil one. They hadn't been with him when he called his disciples to him. All they knew, was that he was different.

For 30 years Jesus had been a respectful and obedient son. OK, there was that one time in the temple. When he decided to stay behind and spend time with the teachers and scribes rather than returning home with his family and friends. But apart from that, he had always been a support to his mother and a help to his siblings. But here he is, in his own backyard, not only creating a scene, but acting in a way that is so counter cultural, that his family think that Jesus has really lost the plot. So they try to fight their way through the crowds to save him from himself.

Jesus, however, knows who he is. He is secure in his identity, proclaimed by the Holy Spirit and God his heavenly father at his baptism. He had worked his way through the time in the desert, consolidating in his own mind his identity. He had spent time alone with God and came out of the desert a changed man. Secure in who he was. So when his earthly family try to take him away from his God given task, back to be a dutiful son and brother, his response sounds really harsh. "Who are my mother and my brothers?"

It is only Mark who records this particular incident. Unsurprising perhaps, because it makes for pretty painful reading. Not only does Jesus seem to be disowning his family, but he is also accused of being the devil.

So how did Jesus get to this point? A little earlier in Mark's Gospel account we hear that Jesus had returned home but he hadn't gone to visit his mother and siblings. Unheard of in that part of the world. His Mum must have been disappointed and worried. Then there were the worrying third hand accounts of Jesus' actions. His brothers and sisters must have been cross with Jesus too – they expected Jesus, as the oldest son, to be there for the family, not to go off and do his own thing. I wonder if his brothers were resentful of having to 'pick up the slack'. Or if his sisters

were cross with Jesus. After all, their marriage prospects would have been dwindling with a widowed mother and now have a brother who is creating a scene in the neighbourhood. (See Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3) Yet, Jesus' family love him so they try to stage an intervention, to get 'their' Jesus back.

Then comes, what sounds like a painful reproof - "who are my mother and brothers?".

How must that have cut Mary to the quick. Mary who had given everything to protect Jesus. She had risked her reputation, her marriage, even her life, simply to bring him to birth. Let alone everything that had happened since.

The expectations and response of Jesus' family have been described as the real 'parable' in this passage that explains why the religious authorities' accusations are so ridiculous. The religious authorities claim that Jesus must be the devil because he has power over demons. Jesus is quick to point out that if he was the devil, casting out demons, destroying their power, would be a ridiculous thing to do. Just as a kingdom divided against itself will fall, or a family at odds with each other. It is then that the message comes through that Jesus' family are there and want to take him home. Jesus refuses. He realises that he will hurt his earthly family, but if his mother and siblings are trying to divide his kingdom on earth, regardless of any shared blood, they are not his family. However those who believe in him, those who follow him, they become his family.

For all their religious authority, their knowledge and 'understanding'. The religious authorities, in accusing Jesus of being the devil, are committing the unforgivable sin. They are blaspheming against God's Holy Spirit mightily present within Jesus. They are calling that which is holy and pure, evil and corrupt. Instead of focusing upon their own faith journey they are threatening the faith journeys of Jesus' disciples and followers, scaring them by making false claims about his identity: if Jesus is in fact the devil, then those who follow him must be demons.

So what do these two stories of complicated interpersonal dynamics mean for us, here in 21st century Corley and Fillongley?

We, just like the Corinthians, just like those teachers of the law, just like Jesus' family and friends did; we all have a choice. Will we follow traditional or perceived wisdom? Will we take the conventional path? Will we be afraid of rocking the boat? Will we do only what is acceptable in the world's eyes?

Or will we follow Jesus, even when he calls us to do the unconventional, the counter cultural, the outrageous, in the service of him and his heavenly Father?

That is a choice that we are called to make every day, and that is our challenge every day. Are we part of a united family of God or a divided family of the world? Can we, by our words, our actions, the way we live our lives, be part of the process that helps to change the world into one that more closely resembles the kingdom of heaven? Can we be the part of the change, the catalyst, that faithful followers of Jesus Christ have always been? Can we be counted amongst Jesus' mother and brothers?

It is up to you and me so let us pray:

Father God, draw us together here, united in faith and purpose, and with Christ and one another, having the same mind among us and same goal: to seek your kingdom and do your will. Teach us what it means to be your children, your people, your family, and help us to honour you through honouring that calling. **Amen** (Nick Fawcett)

* <https://faithsurvey.co.uk/uk-christianity.html>