

Prayer: *We thank you, Creator God, for your words of wholeness for our world. May we grow in your love, wisdom, and presence so that when facing our world we may be the leaders you need, as we live your kingdom's ways. Amen.*

'What we hear' is our title today – and I have drawn three themes from our two readings 1. Politics, 2. Family, 3. Forgiveness; because today from these readings what we hear is really important; and what people heard; and what they wanted to hear and what is understood about God at work in Jesus & Spirit.

So, about hearing – did you know that there is a difference in function between our left and right ears? *Well for most of us* .. our left ear is specialised in 'hearing' speech. Spoken words and our right ear is specialised for hearing music and song. So if we have hearing impairment in our ears or maybe in one ear – it does have a greater impact than most of us are aware. So perhaps our 'selective' hearing function has a physiological basis – *well, we can hope* 😊.

The first task of listening today was in the realm of politics in both Samuel and his people. Samuel's people wanted a king, just like everyone else. I have to share that this always makes me think of children and early teens. The "‘I want’ because my best friend has... and I have to be the same/ equal/ better." *We want a king because everyone else has one...* and we won't **hear** otherwise. cV

Israel was a nation under the rule of her God *through* her priests, under the High Priest. They served as the leaders in **both** what we would call 'government' and church, under God. Samuel's position was very complex ^{*1}he acted as the religious leader, intercessor, prophet, he even built altars (1 Sam 3:20; 4:1; 7:5, 17), he dispensed justice within the community (1 Sam 7:15-17). And in addition, no successful military venture seems to have been undertaken without his leadership! (1 Sam 7:2-4).

Israel was therefore in a very different political position to her neighbours. Most of their rivals had a 'King' who was both the political power base **and** worshiped as their divine entity / their god. Making things worse for Israel was that they knew their nearest rivals, '**The Philistines**' held technological advantages over them militarily, (not just Goliath!) (1 Sam 13:19-22) making them a huge threat politically. Then we add into the picture how the scriptures give us a picture that the Israelites were worshipping other gods (1 Sam 7:3-4), both local deities and their neighbour's gods.

So they are therefore in trouble, already on two fronts **before** we add in the family difficulties Samuel has, it is no wonder that the people try to avoid God and Samuel's successor and go asking for a 'King'. Samuel's family issues were that in the existing system the High Priests sons were expected to follow him in leadership. Unfortunately Samuel's sons were as bad as his predecessor Eli's sons, (1 Sam 8:1-3) which is why Samuel had the job anyway. Still, Samuel felt they were rejecting him but God answer's saying, it is God they are rejecting by not listening.

They are determined to be like everyone else. They will not hear what the consequences are. True, the kind of King, Samuel described took 3 generations to come, Saul (a tribal leader), David (the unifier of the tribes) and **King** Solomon – who was exactly what Samuel described. Then they 'heard', *too late*. cV

The political element is tightly woven into Jesus exchanges in the Mark text today as well. I am not sure we hear it as well as his people heard it – but some scholars make the point that in his parable about the 'strong man and Satan' he might actually have been referring to the ^{*2} Temple, it's sacred vessels and its priests who needed to be bound, in order that 'religion' might be 'plundered' for *all to share*. Even if we don't follow these scholars' arguments, we recognise in this verbal exchange the political nature of the charges being made and accusations being thrown at Jesus to try dismiss him and so stop his followers / his movement / his words being heard. Name calling by adults is sad, by family and religious leaders so hurtful But it happened to Jesus and still happens... *right?....* -> cV

^{*1} H Wallace, ^{*2} J Petty, ^{*3} Richard Deibert, ^{*4} Katherine Matthews, ^{*5} Charles Cousar, ^{*6} Lamar Williamson Jr (*Mark, Interpretation*), ^{*7} W Loader

Do we still not dismiss someone or an idea or a movement by saying – it's mad, he's mad... Jesus family certainly did, perhaps to protect – a legal case of insanity being established so to avoid a death on the cross??? Perhaps to try and save family honour? Our text today has two attempts by his family to remove him from public exposure. The first one has them trying to 'take charge' ^{*3} but the Greek word used here is "an aggressive Greek verb that can mean 'seize,' 'grab,' or 'arrest.' It means business!

When it comes to his family, what Jesus does is widen the circle of belonging to **include all** who do God's will, if that is our genetic/ or blood family great, but for Jesus in this point in his life it was actually those in the room with him. His blood family are on the outside, calling into him. Again we can hear just **why** our Christian understanding of belonging in Jesus family was –is so strong it is **His gift** to us.

We know how strong the call from our family of origin is, **not only in** language, but custom and culture. For some of us it is a healthy call, but for others of us there were 'unhealthy tones' in the call that we still need to be able to leave outside the room of our living! So sometimes we need to hear Jesus words in this text, to give us the freedom to leave our family 'outside' – for a while! And when we do that in the comfort and safety of Jesus circle of friends we experience the presence of the God of grace, love, mercy and hope. We do it from a place of belonging!

Jesus is redefining 'family' – he *doesn't* reject his own, **he just opens** its meaning wide, ^{*4}“Jesus says: in my family it doesn't matter if you're a religious expert or a perfect person. It doesn't matter who your mother or father is, or what you've done in the past.... experts are not rejected or excluded, **but when** anyone **fails** to open their ears, eyes and hearts to what Jesus is saying and doing, and they are gravely mistaken when they choose not to see goodness right before their eyes. They draw a line in the wrong place, and stay on the outside of the circle of grace.”

They stay in a place where God cannot extend forgiveness to them – for they will not hear the offer. The experts accuse Jesus of working for Satan. I think it fair to say he is angry and he doesn't seem to mind for his own sake, but ^{*7} he **does mind** when they slander the Spirit of God **who empowers him** to do such work (3:28). Rejecting God means rejecting forgiveness and grace, making no forgiveness possible. What ^{*4}Jesus is saying is that the great sin here is a failure (refusal?) to see goodness for what it is, and evil for what it is, **and to recognize**, to acknowledge **the difference**.

^{*4}The sin against the Holy Spirit that He speaks about ^{*6}"is unforgivable because it rejects the very agent of God's healing and forgiveness." It is true that anyone who worries about it is, in a sense, logically, innocent of that sin. "Only those who set themselves against forgiveness," are excluded from it"

It makes sense doesn't it? One of my ^{*4}sources said: “Year ago, I heard someone say that the only people who go to hell are the ones who choose to go there, who choose to spend eternity apart from God, who choose everything that is not-God. It was a matter of logic: if you spend your life really hating the things of God, why would you choose to spend eternity with God?” So isn't that what Jesus is talking about when he gives this disturbing sentence about the one and only sin that won't be forgiven? Cv

The sentence begins with Jesus saying ^{*2}**“amen I say to you,”** which means it is going to be a special announcement. **All** (*panta*) will be forgiven. Whatever sins a person may do, whatever slanders they may utter, **are all forgiven**. Whoever slanders against the Holy Spirit, *however*, does not have "forgiveness into the eternal." (*a literal translation*)

Whoever, *in other words*, looks at Jesus casting out demons, and says that Satan is casting out demons is slandering the Holy Spirit. Whoever looks at the works of Jesus—his open table of fellowship, assurance of the dignity of all people, his healing of outcasts, critiques of the Temple, his sense of family --and calls it all an act or acts of the devil has put themselves beyond God's reach. They have left no room for God to be invited in to their lives, their world. They do not; **will** not hear Jesus invitation to be family – forgiven into full relationship with God through His Spirit nor will they share his words of life. Can they hear this? Do we? Amen