Jesus: For or Against?
Mark 3:7-35

Now, apparently, being famous is not all it's cracked up to be. Utada Hikaru, the Japanese-American singer, said, 'I can never really enjoy being famous.' Which is just as well, I thought, because I'd never heard of her.

But someone I had heard of, Robert de Niro, once said, 'The hardest thing about being famous is that people are always nice to you.' Except in an age of online trolls. In fact, today, I think it would be fair to say that two things follow fame: Crowds and conflict. Whether you're a sports star, a pop star, a politician or climate activist, if you're famous, crowds are going to follow you, but so too is controversy.

And the same was true for Jesus. Look at v7-8, 'Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed, from Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon. When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him.' There's no questioning Jesus' popularity, is there? His appeal is across the board - geographically and socially. So much so that he has to have a boat ready, v9, 'Lest they crush him.'

Yet, he was also a deeply polarising figure. One British politician said, 'I'm proud of my enemies.' But, in the case of Jesus, when it's his own family, or the great and the good who are opposing him, it should give you pause. Because Jesus is unlike your normal celebrity. He doesn't just want you to listen to his music or watch him play sport; he doesn't just want you use green energy or give him your vote. He wants you to give him your life. But should you? Should you side with someone who in his own day was so divisive?

Well, to decide that you need to ask three questions, Who is he? Am I for him or against him? And how should I decide one way or the other?

Who is He?
Now, occasionally, I get asked to write a reference. Someone's applying for a job, or a place on a missions trip, and I've got to write saying what they're really like. Or I might get asked to support a passport application, and sign the back of the photo and confirm that this *really* is what they look like and they're of good character. Which, when they're Australian, can be a little tricky.

But the point of a reference is that someone who can be trusted vouches for them.

But with Jesus, it's the unclean spirits, who repeatedly vouch for him, or at least tell us who he is: v11, 'And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, "You are the Son of God."'

Now, in the West, you might struggle to believe in the idea of the supernatural and an evil that's personal. But if that's you, take a step back and look at the rest of the world, because compared to the rest of the world a sanitised and materialistic view of the world is the minority opinion. And the rest of the world doesn't doubt the reality of evil, they see it everyday. What they *might* doubt is how anyone could doubt it. And look at Ukraine. If you've found yourself saying anything along the lines of, 'this is so wrong, this is wicked, how could people do that?' Then realise it's not just Ukraine that's being attacked. It's the post-modern premise that truth and morality and good and bad are just social constructs. When you feel anger rising up inside you at what you're seeing, it's because you instinctively know there is such a thing as wrong, as evil. But secularism can never

give you a reason for that, while the Bible and the Judaeo-Christian world view can. Because it tells you evil is real, it's personal, and it's deeply destructive.

But when the people whose lives these unclean spirits are destroying came face to face with Jesus, Mark tells us they fell down before him. It's as if the powers of darkness can't stay standing in front of him. And if those standing around were wondering, 'who is this guy?' It's as if the demons pull back the curtain on the unseen world: v11 again, "You are the Son of God."

But Jesus silences them. They're saying exactly what God the Father said at Jesus' baptism, and what Peter will say later, but unlike the Father and Peter, when the demons say it, there's no love there. Augustine said, 'to one [to God the Father, to Peter] he is lovely, but to the other he is terrible.' Roosevelt said, 'I ask you to judge me by the enemies I have made'. Well, if that's the case, then terror of darkness in the face of Jesus is testimony enough.

But it's not just unclean spirits who provide evidence for who Jesus is. Verses 13-14: 'And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve.' And in Judaism 12 was highly symbolic. It's the number of the tribes of Israel. But so too were mountains symbolic. And after delivering Israel from slavery in Egypt God called those 12 tribes to meet him at a mountain, Mt Sinai, and made them his people. And here is Jesus, calling 12 men, on a mountainside, to be with him. He's not just choosing his mates. He's re-forming and restoring God's chosen people, Israel. But notice what he doesn't do. He doesn't make himself one of the 12. He doesn't pick 11 and then say, 'hey guys, you and me, we're the new 12 tribes.' No. He appoints 12 and he's not one of them.

So whose position is he putting himself in? God's. He's the One who calls Israel to himself and makes them his people.

But notice what else he does. During his dispute with the scribes he says: v28, "*Truly, I say to you*, all sins will be forgiven the children of man." Now, in Jesus' day, if a rabbi wanted to bolster his argument, he'd appeal to the teaching of his predecessors: 'As Rabbi Shammai said…' And in the Old Testament, prophets would say, 'Thus says the Lord.' Jesus does neither. He says, Truly, *I* say to you. He's his own authority. And that word *truly* is the word *Amen*. And before Jesus it was only ever used at the end of a sentence to mean: that's right, agreed, confirmed. The only time it's used in a way different from that is in Isaiah 65:16, where God is called 'The God of Truth'. Literally, the God of Amen. And here is Jesus saying, *Amen* - at the beginning the sentence - Amen, I say to you. I'm the standard. I'm the authority. It's my word that's the truth.

Now, plenty of other religious leaders have claimed to be great prophets. Jesus is in a different league. He doesn't claim to be God's spokesman. He claims to be God. The God of the Amen.

How are you supposed to respond to a man like that?

Are You for Him or Against Him?

And here we get two very different responses to him. Firstly, the disciples. And in medicine, as I'm sure elsewhere, we used to talk about *'see one, do one, teach one'*. A junior doctor needs to learn how to perform a practical procedure. So, you get her to watch you do one, then you let them do one while you watch them. And then, they go and teach it to someone else. You observe, you do, you teach.

Or think of Swiss apprenticeships. When we first moved to Switzerland we thought, 'You only let 30% go to Uni and the rest get shunted into apprenticeships? That's a terrible idea.' Over time you realise it's the opposite. Young people get trained, and trained for jobs that are needed.

And when Jesus calls the 12, that's what he's calling them to. It's what he calls us all to. To apprenticeship: to learn from and be trained by him. But it begins with him calling, and them responding: v13, 'He… called to him those whom he desired and they came.'

Now, maybe you're not yet a Christian, but you're investigating the Christian faith. Well, what this and other passages tell us, is that even the faintest glimmer of interest on your part is you beginning to hear him calling you. And that voice might seem very faint and miles away. But he is calling you.

And for those of us who are Christians, we can start off thinking we became a Christian out of our own free choice, and we did! But what you also discover is that there was this school teacher who was praying for you, or there was that book that you just happened to pick up, or there was that conversation with a friend that made you think. And you look back and realise… did I decide to follow Jesus? Sure. But now I see all these ways he was calling me to come before I ever came.

And when he calls, he calls for a purpose. Verse 14, 'And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) *so that they might be with him*.' So, at the heart of what it means to be a Christian, is not - as in other religions - a list of requirements you have to do. It's relationship. It's to be with Jesus. It's to sit at his feet and learn from and be shaped by him. And everything else flows out of that.

And stuff does flow out of that, because you can't spend time with Jesus and it not fundamentally change the way you see and do life. Verses 14-15 again, 'He appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him *and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.'*

So, firstly, he calls them apostles - which means 'one who is sent as a representative.' And as eye-witness of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the 12 were apostles in a way no-one else ever is. And yet, there's a sense in which every Christian is sent by Jesus into the world - into work or onto campus tomorrow - as his representative.

And they and you and I are sent with a message. Now, if you're religiously minded, it's easy enough to find a message, isn't it? It could be your own views of what God is like, or your take on politics, or morality. But these guys didn't get to create their own message. They were sent to proclaim the good news of Jesus. It's what we're all called to do. Not necessarily standing at the front, but letting all that Jesus has done shape all our interactions.

And not just with words. Because Jesus gave them authority to cast out demons. To push back the darkness. And Paul says to us in Romans 12, 'Do not be overcome by evil, *but overcome evil with good*.' It's what we're all called to do.

Now you might think, 'I'm not sure I'm the proclaiming or overcoming darkness kind of person.' Sure, but look at these 12. You've got a tax-collector like Matthew who was a collaborator with the Romans, and you've got a zealot like Simon who murdered collaborators. And in between you've

got a fisherman, Simon, who Jesus calls Peter, *Rock*, but who to start with was anything but a rock, and James and John who because of their explosive personalities Jesus calls 'sons of thunder'.

The only qualification any of these men had for what Jesus called them to is that he called them. He chose them, and they came. Which means you can too.

But if they were for Jesus, not everyone responded so positively. People are being healed, the powers of darkness are being expelled, and v21, 'When his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."'

Now, if you're not yet a Christian you can hear the kind of claims Jesus is making for himself, and think, 'well, that's all a bit far fetched, but I can still see that he was a great spiritual teacher.' But what his family tells you is that no one in their right mind would say the things Jesus says. As CS Lewis put it, 'He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.'

And, of course, one reason why his family may have moved against him is that in an honour-shame culture Jesus' claims and conflicts would have reflected badly on them. But not just them. It's a reason why you may be weighing up whether to become a Christian, or come out as a Christian at work or your friendship group: What will others think of me?

But if his family think he's mad, the religious scribes think he's bad. Verse 22, 'And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons."' Now, notice, there's no debate that Jesus is doing what he's doing. The only debate is, how's he doing it? Where's his power from? Satan, say the scribes.

And Jesus replies, v23-25, "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." Because fractured kingdoms and fighting families just don't last. Infighting always ends in defeat. To divide is to conquer. And Satan's not so stupid as to bring about his own downfall.

Now, if you've ever spoken to someone seriously mentally unwell, one of the tell-tale signs is their lack of lucidity. Their thinking and speaking is all over the place. You never get that with Jesus. You get the opposite. And in a couple of sentences he's convincingly and eloquently destroyed the argument that he's bad. But he's also answered any concerns that he's mad. Because a mad man doesn't speak like this.

So, if he's neither mad nor bad, who or what is he?

Verse 27, "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." And the strong man is Satan. And his house is his power that holds people captive. And Jesus has come as the one who binds the strong man and sets his captives free.

But if Satan's the strong man, who's stronger than satan? Who's stronger than the most powerful created being? Only the Creator.

So, are you for him or against him? If you're not yet a Christian, why come to him rather than turn from him? And if you are a Christian, why keep following and trusting him when the world increasingly says *you're* mad or bad to do so?

How to Decide?
I want to give you four reasons:

Firstly, because in Jesus you have a new name
Which sounds weird, I know, but in the Old Testament God would change people's names as a sign of the change he was bringing in their lives. And Abram became Abraham; and Sarai became Sarah; and Jacob became Israel. And when Mark lists the 12 Simon tops it: v16, 'Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter).' Rock - because on this unreliable man, and on his confession of who Jesus is, Jesus built his church. Because Jesus has the power to change a life like Peter's and the direction of a life.

And maybe you've been told you'll never amount to anything. Maybe you look at your track record and believe that about yourself. But Jesus says, come to me. I'm the one with the power to make all things new. I'm the one who gives you a new name - a hope and a future.

Secondly, in him there's forgiveness
Look at v28, where Jesus says, "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man." And maybe there's something in your past and you think, "why did I do that?" And guilt hangs like a shadow over you. Well, Jesus says, come to me, there is nothing outside the range of my forgiveness, let me lift that guilt off you.

'But what if I've committed the unforgivable sin?', you might say. Verse 29, "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." And you're right, there is one sin that is unforgivable. It's to constantly refuse to come to Christ for forgiveness. It's to spend your life refusing Christ's offer to you. And if you refuse him, where else can you turn for forgiveness? That was the fatal error these scribes were in danger of making: v30, 'For they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."' But if you're worried you've committed that sin, you haven't. Because your worry tells you, you still want forgiveness. So come, Jesus says, I turn no-one away who comes.

Thirdly, because in him you become family
Verse 32-35, 'And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you. And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

It's ironic, isn't it? Normally, a family is on the inside and a crowd is on the outside. But here, the crowd is inside and the family outside. Because you can be Jesus' flesh and blood family, and that mean nothing for whether you're actually trusting him. You can be brought up in a Christian home, you can be proud of the nation you're from, you can hold impeccable conservative, or liberal,

political views, and still be on the outside. What matters is your heart relationship with Jesus. That you do the will of God, which as we've already seen in Mark is to repent, believe and follow Christ.

And when that's true for you, Jesus looks at you and says 'you're family'. As Hebrews says, he's not ashamed to be called your brother. Think of that. Jesus is not ashamed of you. So let him lift your shame. And don't be ashamed of him.

But fourthly, because he was betrayed for you.
Every list of the 12 apostles begins with Simon Peter, and ends with Judas Iscariot: v19, 'And Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.' And it's that fact, that the Son of God, the One who restores the people of God, the God of the Amen, who binds the strong man, and frees the captives, was betrayed for you, and became weak for you, that should cause us to go to him.

You see, how does Jesus break the power of Satan over us? - by being broken at the cross and then rising in triumph. How does he secure the forgiveness of our sins and pay the infinite weight of our debt? By becoming the infinitely perfect sacrifice for sin. How can you and I be welcomed into the family of God, and have God the Father call us his own? Because at the cross Jesus was forsaken. And he was rejected, by friends and family and leaders and ultimately his heavenly Father, that we might be accepted.

The writer of Hebrews says, 'Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted' (Heb 12:3). Consider him. Because if Jesus loves you enough to endure opposition and betrayal and the cross for you, he's not going to let you go in the middle of your trial, or the opposition you face. So, don't lose heart. Don't turn away from Christ. Instead, go to him.