

Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> June, 2021  
Mark 3:21-end

The unforgiveable sin?? Could there be such a thing? This morning's Gospel suggested so ... but what could it possibly be? Here's what got said - what do you think?  
'Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never be forgiven, but is guilty of an eternal sin.'

An eternal sin. An unforgiveable sin. That, one would think, must be a pretty serious degree of evil. What would one have to do to accomplish that? Abuse? Torture? Murder? Apparently not. What gets singled out here as the sin above all others, the sin which cannot be pardoned, is the rather strange notion of 'blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.' What on earth can that mean? What it doesn't mean is simply saying something rude about the Holy Spirit. Saying 'screw the Holy Spirit' is not going to damn you. God is not a fragile little ego like ours. In his case – perhaps his alone – it is actually true that words will never hurt him. God is not going to be hurt or offended or angry about words.

Saying 'screw the Holy Spirit' will not damn you. Meaning 'screw the Holy Spirit' might. That would mean looking at goodness and grace and God, and because it didn't suit us, ignoring, rejecting, despising them. There's a concrete example in today's Gospel reading. Jesus has been casting demons out of people. We might debate exactly what that sort of language points to, but at the least it means that he has bringing peace and healing to lives that have been wracked by spiritual, emotional and mental turmoil. Chaotic, warped lives have been coming good around him, through him. Goodness, grace and God were actually happening. But it did not suit some people to see this. They had Jesus pinned down in their minds as the enemy, and unpinning him would take more rethinking, more humility, more change than they could face. It was simply easier to say, not out loud but deep inside their hearts, 'screw the holy spirit'. Jesus isn't goodness, and grace and God; he is Beelzebul, the prince of the demons.

And the reason that is the unforgiveable sin is not because it is the worst thing you can do. You can do much, much worse. But when you do, it is never the end of the story. Sometimes you can say sorry, try to make amends and start again. It may be that amends are impossible, that new starts are impossible – it is difficult to imagine, for example, how a mass murderer could start again. Even they, though, can hate what they've done. Even they can fling themselves before their neighbours, and their Maker, and weep, and plead for mercy. Human justice may not be able to help them; the God who raises the dead – the physically, morally, spiritually dead – can, and He wants to. He hates nothing and no-one he has made; he died for us all, even the worst, and he wants to raise us all.

But even He cannot help someone who will not be helped – who is so locked inside themselves, so proud, so closed, that they will not see reality. The person who thinks they have no need of forgiveness. The person who is so confident of their own rightness, of themselves, that they would rather call good evil, and evil good, than sacrifice their own self-image. The lawyer who draws up the note justifying torture, the PR man who spins the massacre of children as counter-terrorism, the factory owner or the

shareholder who calls exploitation efficiency. The ones who convince themselves of these lies, and so will never ask forgiveness – these are the lost ones. That is the blasphemy against the Spirit, the unforgiveable sin.

Except, is it? Think of the men who pounded the nails into Jesus. Perhaps they did it hating every moment, out of fear of what would happen to them. Perhaps they were doing it unthinkingly, just as part of a day's work. But some of them will have done it fully convinced of Roman righteousness, that this was justice, done for the greater good, what rebel scum deserved. From top to bottom of the chain of command, from Pilate and Caiaphas to the man with the nail and hammers, some of them will have committed the unforgiveable sin. Proud, violent men, wrapped up in themselves and Roman glory, closed against reality and God. And Jesus said: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they're doing. Father, forgive them.

Do we think that the Father rejected that prayer? No. God wills, desperately, to forgive even the unforgiveable. Even those who do not want to be forgiven, who don't know they need it, who refuse to need it. It is God's greatest desire to bring them home. That is what becoming man, and dying on a cross, was all about. No-one, not even those who have put themselves there, has to be in hell. All can turn, always. And God will always be there, waiting, wanting, working to save us from ourselves. You can say 'screw the holy spirit', you can even mean it: you can mean it now, and go on meaning it until you die – you still will not have stopped Jesus Christ praying for you. You still will not have stopped God wanting to bring you home. You can say screw God, but God will never say 'screw you' - no matter how much you want him to, or how much you deserve it.

What are you meant to actually do about all of this? Number one, I suppose, keep a close eye on yourselves for that hardness of heart, for that lazy, complacent hardness which would rather call good evil than ask hard questions about yourself. Keep a close eye for arrogance. Stay in touch with your brokenness and sinfulness, and don't think you're better than you are. But number two, almost more importantly, remember that in the end what you think of yourself is not the key thing. Human beings are rubbish judges of their own character. We think we are bad when we are good, and that we're good when we're bad. So the wisest thing to do is forget trying to judge yourself. Forget trying worrying what you're really like, about whether you might be the unforgiveable sinner. There is no such thing. Ask God for mercy. Love your neighbour. There is nothing more to do.