

There are two approaches to preaching today. One is to emphasize the context of the Scripture reading, to explain what it meant in that time and place. The other is instead to illustrate how God is active in our lives, using Scripture tangentially or not at all. I always aim to try to do a bit of both -- to contextualize the Scripture and to try to relate the message to today's world. .

At first sight, this is a bizarre piece of Scripture. Right before this passage, Jesus had appointed twelve disciples and healed a whole lot of people. He had become a rock-star preacher and healer. He had just preached to an enormous crowd from a boat beside the seaside. His ministry was so popular that he didn't even have time to eat. But people were saying that he has gone out of his mind and his family sought to restrain him. Maybe they were worried about his safety and just wanted to get him home somewhere normal. I cannot claim that my own ministry has been as popular as that of Jesus, but there is a small parallel in my own life. When I started my studies at seminary, my mother (no church-goer!) asked Michelle, "Why on earth is Nigel doing that?" She thought that I was crazy!

Other participants in the Scripture story were some Scribes, who had travelled about 70 miles from Jerusalem. I assume they had come to check up on Jesus. He had already made enemies with the Pharisees because they considered that he did not uphold the ban on Sabbath work, as we read last week. People thought he was crazy, and Scribes claimed that Jesus was in league with the Devil.

What on earth is going on here, and what does it matter for our own faith lives and our own behaviour? To say that someone was crazy or that they were in league with the Devil was actually much the same thing. In those days, people didn't have mental illnesses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disease. They were said to be possessed by demons. In other words, they had the Devil inside them. That doesn't make sense, said Jesus. If I have demons inside me, how could I possibly cure people possessed with demons. That would be the devil casting out himself.

The Scribes were uncomfortable with this popular but unconventional preacher. To be accused of being crazy/ in league with the Devil/ heretical – take your pick – is a common reaction. When Galileo pointed his telescope to the night sky and concluded that Copernicus was right -- the Earth is not the centre of the universe -- the Church authorities condemned him as a heretic and suppressed his books. After all, God had made this planet his very special place, and crowned his creation with us, humanity! In a word that links modern language back to the Scripture, they demonized Galileo. We saw that idea in the recent provincial election -- you can't let Doug Ford/Andrea Horwath become premier; they are crazy; they will ruin the province. It's worse in the US, where political tribalism has come to equate one's political opponents not just with being crazy but being evil/devilish/demonic. That is very different from respectfully disagreeing with another person or group. It's getting close to that situation in Canada over whether or not you support oil sands development.

At the end of our Scripture passage, Jesus' family members came back into the picture and called for him to come out to them. But Jesus apparently dismissed them saying that the disciples, not his blood relatives, were his true brothers and sisters. We might ask why did Mark portray Jesus as so dismissive, even rude, to his family members? Had Jesus forgotten the Fifth Commandment: honour your father and mother? One way to make sense of this apparent rudeness of Jesus towards his biological family is to recognize that for Jesus, there was no nepotism; his biological family had no special access or

favoured position. This is often called Jesus' sense of "radical equality". It antithesis is hierarchy. In order to try to limit hierarchy at St. George's, we rotate positions like being a member of Corporation, and try to have many voices participate in our weekly worship. It is also why I do not want to be called 'Father' or 'Reverend Nigel'.

Maybe the relationship between Jesus and his biological family was not dysfunctional after all. Radical equality is exactly what attracted the earliest converts to Christianity, which is why Paul wrote that in his churches people should be thought of as neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, freeborn person or slave. Paul wasn't writing a theological essay to the church he had founded in Galatia (part of modern Turkey); it was a pastoral letter to correct what I assume had been the cause of conflict. People back then, I'm sure, had just as much trouble in setting aside their prejudices as we do today.

Secular Canada has tried to emulate Paul's approach with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, one of whose goals has been to promote equality through outlawing discrimination. Perhaps a modern-day Canadian St. Paul might write, "Now there is neither Aboriginal Canadian nor Canadian of settler heritage, neither able bodied nor disabled person, neither straight nor gay" and so on. If we truly believe that the Gospel calls us to this idea of radical equality, that is what we have to believe and also to act out in our lives. And if that is so, Jesus was implying that even those scribes with whom he had been arguing were to be included as his brothers and sisters. And that is a tough row to hoe. It means, for example, that whichever party we voted for last Thursday, their political opponents were and remain our brothers and sisters. We are all Ontarians even if we disagree about which policies are the best ones for our province. I watched the returns on TVO, where one of the commentators was an NDP supporter who was wearing a clerical collar (why, I can't imagine!). I thought it was very un-Jesus like of her to be slagging Doug Ford. After all, we all have to live in this province, not matter what our politics. She seemed to be like the Scribes, demonizing her political opponent. It reminded me that our part in bringing radical equality about is not merely to stop unfair discrimination, but to call it out when we encounter it. The difficulty for all of us is to keep our natural prejudices in check, whether in the world of Canadian society or the Kingdom of God.

The other passage we heard this morning links directly to this Memorial service. St. Paul wrote to his church in Corinth that our [meaning, his and theirs] earthly bodies groan, longing to be clothed in our heavenly dwelling. No matter how strong our belief in an afterlife with God for our immortal souls, most of us do not seem so keen to get there that they groan at having to stay in this world. However, we have to remember that Paul and the earliest Christians believed that Christ would return within their lifetimes to institute God's righteous rule on earth. If you were expecting the end of the age to happen, literally, at any moment, you would not be bothered about the trivial affairs of this world.

Today we remember the people in our beautiful cemetery. They have left this world. Some of them were close friends and relatives of parishioners and friends here today. But beneath the ancient headstones lie people who were in a sense the forebears of us all, whether or not they were our biological ancestors. Their faith led them to found this parish, to build this church, and to sustain both its faith and its fabric for 160-plus years. But today's memorial is for everyone, because we all have loved ones who left this life before us, some recently, others, longer ago. Many of their earthly remains lie in other cemeteries, some nearby, others far away. We take a moment this morning to remember them, and to thank them once more for the joys and love they gave us while they were with us. And so we pray that their souls may rest at peace with their Creator, as we hope that ours will also be when the time comes.