10 June 2018: Choral Eucharist
The Second Sunday after Trinity
Psalm 130; Genesis 3: 8–15; 2 Corinthians 4: 13 – 5: 1; Mark 3: 20–35
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+ ‘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.’ (Mark 3: 25)

To an historian, the gnomic sentences in the centre of today’s rather complex gospel passage immediately strike the ear. The assertion that a kingdom or house divided against itself is destined to fall resonates across many places and times. In western Europe in the ninth century, the once-united Frankish empire created by Charlemagne descended into bitter civil war among his grandsons and external attacks from pagans became ever more frequent. Churchmen such as Hincmar of Rheims then argued that the realm’s fragmentation had come from within, the direct result of the failures of the royal house to quell its own divisions.

Diarmuid MacCulloch called his magisterial study of the Reformation, *Europe’s House Divided*. Addressing the 16th-century upheavals in Latin Christianity, he declared them to represent ‘the greatest fault line to appear in Christian culture since the Latin and Greek halves of the Roman Empire went their separate ways a thousand years before; they produced a house divided.’

In 1858, in Springfield, Illinois in a speech accepting the Republican party’s nomination as senator for that state, Abraham Lincoln spoke of the danger to the Union of the divisions caused by slavery: ‘A house divided against itself, cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved — I do not expect the house to fall — but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other.

In each period Jesus’ statement that a house divided against itself would not be able to stand acquired direct contemporary relevance; his prophecy apparently proved relevant across the ages. It would have spoken immediately to his own contemporaries, who
would have recalled how Herod the Great’s kingdom had been divided after his death in 4 BC, and it would also have had meaning for the first audience encountering Mark’s gospel. They would have known of the internal divisions that led to the defeat of the Jews in the Jewish War, and of the internal strife in Rome after the death of Nero that produced the year of the four emperors (AD 69).

But Mark’s readers would also have heard these sayings of Jesus in the particular social and political contexts of the churches to whom his gospel was sent. For at its heart, the whole reading is about houses. And by houses I think we should understand both the domestic familial sphere in which the passage begins and ends but also the divided, demonic house over which Jesus demonstrates his superior power, as well as, of course, Jesus’ own house, which functions as a symbol for the church.

The passage is carefully crafted, with an outer, framing narrative relating to Jesus’ own domestic context – in a house, after a long day, hoping to eat something– and his family, who come to try and take him home (fearing that he is mad), but whom, at the end, he rejects. In the middle of that story, Mark places a second narrative: the accusation made against Jesus by the scribes that he is in league with Satan, and Jesus’ response to that charge with three little parables: a kingdom, a house, Satan divided against himself; none of the three can stand. If it were true that Jesus had been casting out demons through Beelzebul (the ruler of the demons), then Satan would indeed be finished: how could Satan possibly cast out Satan?

There follows the more confusing image about tying up a strong man in order to plunder his house, and then Jesus’ unambiguous condemnation of his accusers and the warning against blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. This sin is unforgiveable because it involves Jesus’ opponents mistaking the power of the Spirit at work in him for the work of the devil.

We need to recall that Mark had, at the start of his gospel, described Jesus as endowed with the Spirit, and preaching the good news of God. Those who failed to recognise the Spirit at work in Christ are those whom Mark charged with hardness of heart (3: 5). For Mark, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit meant calling the work of God’s Spirit evil. That may well have had a contemporary resonance for the churches of his own day, if they were encountering difficulties with religious or secular authorities who denied their work was Spirit-driven.
And then at the end of the passage we return to the theme with which Mark had begun, his narrative about Jesus’ domestic context and family. In the light of those parables we find ourselves contemplating his relatives in a different light. At the outset they seemed concerned for his welfare, worried that the press of the crowd meant that he could not even eat, and also about his mental state. But now, they are portrayed as outsiders. Literally outside, standing outside the house where Jesus is sitting inside, in the midst of the crowd, teaching. When they send a message inside asking for him, Jesus’ response cannot have been the one they expected. For Jesus answers his own question – ‘who are my mother and my brothers?’ – not by walking out into his relations’ arms, but by defining his relatives as those who do the will of God. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.

Insiders, those who will do the work of bringing in the kingdom and preaching the good news of salvation, those are defined not by their familial relationships but by their commitment to doing the will of God, of hearing and responding to his call. Outsiders are those who work against God’s will, who impede his work, who set the obligations of family above those of the gospel. Those who do so risk binding us to the powers of evil, rather than to that of Christ.

This was by no means the only occasion when Jesus struggled with his divided house. At the age of 12, he stayed behind in the Temple and it took his parents three days to find him. Mary and Joseph failed to understand his typically teenage response: ‘why were you looking for me? Didn’t you know I have to be in my father’s house’ (Luke 2: 49-50). He was annoyed with Mary at the wedding at Cana, when she wanted him to take care of the wine shortage; elsewhere, Luke reported Jesus’ assertion that he had come to divide households and families, setting members against one another (12: 52-53). We cannot escape the conclusion that family stability can – and often should – be in tension with the imperatives to do God’s work. ‘If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.’ That dictum applies to families, too.

But we, the Protestant Church, are also a house. Does Jesus’ allegation also apply to today’s Anglican communion? Consider how successive archbishops have struggled to maintain the unity of this increasingly disparate body of churches. They have apparently believed that for all the fundamental doctrinal divisions that separate, for example, the Episcopal Church of America from the churches of the Global South, the prospect of allowing the Communion to split would be worse than maintaining the current uneasy fiction that we are not a house divided.
I don’t want to get diverted into Anglican politics. But I do wonder if our obsession with preventing a rupture in the Communion is blinding us to more important truths. Instead of recriminating with those whose views we don’t share and trying to assert our biblical faithfulness or doctrinal superiority over our enemies, ought we not to be asking ourselves whether this prophecy in fact needs to come to pass in our own time. A house divided against itself is indeed not able to stand. But might two houses not stand more surely on sounder foundations if they became separate churches, bound loosely together, perhaps in an Episcopalian federation?

We would, of course, share a common past and tradition, but we would no longer be shackled by the divisions that currently separate us, the constant arguments and hostility between those who see themselves as insiders and those condemned to be outsiders. The lessons from history suggest that we might find ourselves better able to go out and bear fruit, fruit that will last, if we were apart. Consider, for example, the multiplicity of Orthodox churches that continue to thrive. How the Catholic church was ultimately strengthened by the Counter-Reformation, just as Protestant churches of different complexions bloomed; how the Anglican church survived the split with Methodism; how two separate Presbyterian churches have subsisted apart in Scotland since 1900.

Living out the sort of discipleship that Mark advocates in his gospel means distancing ourselves from our petty squabbles, from the sibling rivalries that damage our mission and detract from our teaching, and to focus instead on the message that Jesus preached. Jesus came to free us from slavery to sin, from slavery to different sorts of demonic possession, and from absorption with ourselves. He calls us into his boundless love, a love stronger than all the illusions and deceptions of evil. As we remember that call and prepare ourselves to share in his love through this eucharist, let us recall also that a house divided can stand for something special, something worth preserving in its several mansions. Something which a house united might struggle to encompass in all its spiritual richness and diversity.