

## THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

When a family buys a new car everyone has a different attitude to it:  
Dad says: 'I wonder how many miles it does to the gallon.'  
Mum says, 'I wonder what colour the upholstery is.'  
The daughter says, 'I wonder how good the mirror is for my make-up.'  
The son says, 'I wonder how fast it'll go.'  
The next door neighbour says, 'I wonder where those idiots got the money from.'

I read this snippet of information in the book, *For the World's Best Driver (2010)* [referred to as a 'Glovebox-full of fun for the Expert behind the Wheel'.]

Of course buying a car is one thing. Driving it is entirely different. The same book comments on an episode of TV's Dr Who. Not being a fan I missed the episode back in 2007, entitled Gridlock, about New York (New, New York to be precise), in the year 5,000,000,053, where a journey of 10 miles could take six years. If this happened in Britain it would mean that you could set off on your seventeenth birthday after passing your driving test and get from London to Brighton, say, before you reached 50. A stroll along the seafront and an ice-cream and you could be back home in plenty of time to celebrate your 80th birthday.

Despite the congestion, even now on our roads, in the book, "the one thing that unites all human beings", according to Dave Barry (quoted in the book) "regardless of age, gender, religion, economic status or ethnic background, is that, deep down inside, we ALL believe we are above average drivers."

For us drivers here this morning, admit it, we are the best! Every other driver on the road either drives too slow, or too fast or drives like an idiot. It is a pity that someone hasn't told this to my back seat drivers! I quite often have three, and all female! Watch your speed! Watch the cyclist! Did you indicate? Dad, did you know that was a roundabout? Don't get too close! Break! Whenever one of those back seat drivers tells you what to do you feel like telling them where to go but usually you can't, because it is your wife, daughter, partner, boyfriend, girlfriend, mother, driving-instructor! But the funny thing is, we're all back seat drivers given half the chance.

When this turns to road rage, an American term introduced in the 1980s and in Britain a decade later, this becomes more serious. Road rage is defined as aggressive behaviour, by a motorist, in response to the actions of another motorist. Results, from a 2003 survey, of 16-30 year olds, reported then, that nearly nine in 10 UK drivers say they have been road rage victims at least once. While 20% said they had experienced road rage more than 10 times, more than 70% admitted committing the offence themselves. A recent Gallup poll, showed Britain to be leading the world in road rage, with 80.4% of UK drivers being victims of it with by far the highest figure (29% victims) being in the South East.

Of those who admitted committing road rage, three in five said they felt "fine" about it. Not many showed remorse. It seems to be linked to congestion and stress, which made me think of what it will be like when it will take us six years to drive ten miles!!! Whatever the cause, and there are many causes and contexts, road rage seems to involve aggression and frustration; an escalation of extreme viewpoints, an entrenchment of attitudes and some really strong labeling. It may well include verbal and physical abuse; it is always unpleasant; it can be nasty, humiliating and painful. It is always serious.

Let me turn to Mark 3: 20 - 30. There are so many complicated and interwoven themes here that I must limit myself to one. And it is the one I have touched on already. Professor Tom Wright, in his commentary of these verses, refers to the time he watched mass demonstrations on the TV news. All relaxed at first; banners and placards give a strong, peaceful message. Police quietly joke with marchers. Suddenly everything changes. No one knows why. There is a scuffle and bottles are thrown. The police charge the protesters, waving their batons at random. It all escalates out of control - Shouting, abuse being hurled, violence erupting, shop windows broken, arrests made! We are all familiar with the scene he witnessed on the TV. It all becomes clear. The police decided the demonstrators are 'scum'; the protesters decided that the police are 'pigs' and immediately labels are put into place, Wright claims, people believe they can do what they like. With battle lines drawn, an escalation of entrenched attitudes and viewpoints follows. Familiar! In both my examples, what happens? Stakes are raised, labels are stuck on people and then it doesn't matter what is done and who gets hurt or humiliated.

One theme from this morning's gospel is that Jesus is labeled. Even his own family rush to take him back to Nazareth, claiming he is 'out of his mind'. They want to grab him, and lock him away until he gets his thinking 'straightened out'. He seems not to be one of them! If his family thought this, what did others think, particularly those who believe strongly in ancient biblical tradition? This gospel is a powerful illustration of the increasing impact of what Jesus was doing and saying. Labels were flying around, attitudes hardening, extreme viewpoints expressed, all with some very strong language. People were alarmed by Jesus' behaviour. Even his family seemed to have a total lack of sympathy for the nature of his ministry. And we are familiar with the negativity of the scribes and Pharisees, believing Jesus' power not to be a good power. He had been taken over by Beelzebub and they were not afraid to say it. Beelzebub literally means 'Lord of the Flies or the Lord of Filth'. Beelzebub was a loathsome, wicked demon associated with all things filthy. How cruel!

They didn't like what Jesus was doing. It didn't fit any of their categories. He had to be marginalized and stopped. So they labeled him as 'out of his mind'. People, then, would not take him seriously. They said that he must be in league with the devil, with Beelzebub. Each time the stakes were being cranked up, attitudes were becoming more entrenched and extreme. Scribes and Pharisees felt justified in taking control. They could see that Jesus' family wanted to take

control too. Both groups wanted Jesus silenced. But Jesus doesn't respond to accuse them. He doesn't lash out. "If he is Beelzebub," he says, "and he is casting out devils then that is the end of the devil's kingdom." The devil's kingdom cannot stand divided. If that is what they are saying then God's kingdom has arrived, by the back door as it were, not despite but because of what they are saying. But we know that God's kingdom had arrived but NOT in this way. Jesus had come and his healing, teaching and preaching were all signs that God's kingdom was here. Jesus was here. He was going to set his people free.

But Jesus warns that there is no middle way. Jesus' words: "People who blaspheme the Holy Spirit will never find forgiveness" should resonate in us so strongly that when we hear or read them we stop in our tracks. Jesus said, repeatedly that if we ask forgiveness and truly repent of our sins, we will be forgiven. However if we turn a deaf ear to the work of the Holy Spirit, then there is no Plan B. There is no turning back. Once that happens all evidence conforms to our beliefs. Things start to escalate; the problem of evil becomes uncontrollable, fully explicable yes, but in an opposite direction. As with my examples, there we have it – pole positions and no middle ground.

Any theme about evil is not a pretty one. It is certainly not a comfortable and easy one to get your head around. It is quite daunting, even frightening. Yet this one of many issues arising, in the verses of Mark's Gospel we have briefly looked at today, needs to be dealt with. Tom Wright makes it clear that Jesus is NOT an interesting historical figure that so many people want to think he is. If he is, he can comfortably be kept at arm's length, out of harm's way. Our gospel this morning clearly states that Jesus is either God's Son who came to earth to open up God's kingdom to us OR he is a dangerous madman, possibly in league with the devil, Beelzebub. All of us who believe in Jesus' message, who want to live with him, through him and in him, must be aware of the evil that surrounds us, the opposition we may face, sometimes, subtle, quiet and unassuming and sometimes open and blatant. Whichever, it is dangerous and threatening and we have to learn how to respond. There is evil around and we have to choose. Sorry, all this sounds stark, black and white and very final. But when we are dealing with the problem of evil, as the theme for today does, then it is.

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