

# Sunday Homily

## FIRST SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

6 JUNE 2021

YEAR B

“He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.”

Mark 3:22

### Illustration

During a war, a plane transporting a group of boys out of danger crashes on an isolated island. With no adult survivors, the boys have to fend for themselves. Initially, they pull together and are resourceful, cooperative and democratic. They elect one of their number as their leader, and agree that their priorities are to have fun and attract attention. They light a fire using a pair of glasses, and take turns to keep it going. They then set about building shelters, finding water and gathering food. For a while it appears idyllic. But before long differences emerge, and a rival group – the “hunters” – is formed, led by the choirboy Jack. Fear and superstition soon start to take a grip on the boys, and some of the “littluns” become afraid of a “beast” that they imagine is lurking on the island. When they find what they suppose to be the beast, their terror intensifies, and any semblance of order quickly deteriorates, with shocking results.

At the heart of William Golding’s novel *Lord of the Flies* is the premise that, if you scratch beneath the surface of man-made culture, it’s not long before “civilisation” breaks down, and people regress to a primitive state of savagery.

### Gospel Teaching

Today’s Gospel reading comes early in Jesus’ ministry, and it’s worth setting it in context. So far in Mark’s Gospel Jesus has been in a whirlwind of preaching and miracles. He has driven out unclean spirits, “convulsing and crying”. He’s cured Simon’s mother-in-law, cleansed a leper, healed a paralysed man and a man with a withered hand. And his magnetism and charisma are as astonishing as his miracles. Huge crowds have been gathering around him and, at his command, people are leaving everything to follow him, including the fishermen Simon and Andrew, and the tax collector Levi.

There’s a palpable sense of excitement, bewilderment and fear in the first three chapters of Mark. For some people it’s an opportunity to seek healing, while for others, particularly the Jewish “establishment”, it’s very alarming. Jesus has started to meet the authorities head-on, challenging their entrenched ideas

about the sabbath. By the time we catch up with him in today's reading, the beleaguered scribes have started a whispering campaign, saying: "He has Beelzebul." Beelzebul, by the way, means "Lord of the Flies".

## Application

Often when we read the Gospels, we characterise the authorities' attitude towards Jesus as a simple power struggle. And it's true that, through heavy-handed application of the laws and petty bureaucracy, the scribes and Pharisees carved for themselves a cosy little niche, which brought them a sense of moral superiority and financial benefits.

But there's much more to it, because Jesus represents a threat on many levels. He is becoming dangerously associated with the underclass, with madness – and with convulsing, crying demons. It's terrifying stuff. And if we'd been there in the crowd, no doubt we'd have felt it too. It's that strange combination of attraction and terror that compels us to stare at a car accident, or gawp at the sight of a celebrity in "meltdown". Because Jesus is, in fact, consorting with chaos, and scratching the surface of anarchy that lies beneath civilisation. And there's something at once irresistible – and very, very frightening – about it.

So not only are the scribes afraid of having the power balance disrupted; they're also downright terrified of the turmoil that Jesus is unleashing. You can bet some of them had nightmares. And they do what many of us do – they batten down the hatches and go into defensive mode. So desperate are they to hang on to this "civilisation" which they've created around them, that their response is to become even more controlling and authoritarian.

In William Golding's novel, the "beast" turns out to be the corpse of an airman – in other words, something human. And nowadays we tend to interpret demons in the Bible as inner demons – the dark side of human nature. Because when we're up against it, we all have within us the capacity for chaos.

It's telling that, in *Lord of the Flies*, it's the formerly angelic chorister, Jack, who descends furthest into savagery – perhaps because he, like the Jewish authorities, has furthest to fall. That's not to say that we should become anarchists, but that we do well to acknowledge our own capacity for chaos. So spare a thought for the tight-lipped authorities, battling with terror in the face of demons – both external, and internal.