

Despair has been called the unforgivable sin-not presumably because God refuses to forgive it, but because it despairs of the possibility of being forgiven.

Frederick Buechner, 1926–

### Related topics

*For further study:*

Jesus Christ; reign of God; Holy Spirit; conversion; family of God; people of God; paschal mystery; freedom from Satan's power; grace and sin; the fall of humanity

### Closing Prayer

God our redeemer,  
in Jesus, your promised Messiah,  
you crushed the power of Satan.

Sustain your Church in the struggle against evil,  
that, hearing your word and doing your will,  
we may be fashioned into a household of true disciples  
who share in the victory of the cross.

Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
God for ever and ever.

*Opening prayers* · 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Opening prayers* : scripture-related collects for the years A, B and C from the sacramentary / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999.

## Proper 5

*Sunday between 5 and 11 June inclusive*

### Principal Service readings

Genesis 3.8-15	God confronts Adam in the garden
Psalms 130	A call to God from the depths
2 Corinthians 4.13 – 5.1	A vision of future glory
Mark 3.20-35	Allegations against Jesus, and his true family

### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,  
speak to our hearts in the stillness,  
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,  
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;  
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

### Gospel Reading

#### *Family concern about Jesus*

<sup>20</sup>The crowd came together again, so that Jesus and his companions could not even eat. <sup>21</sup>When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.' <sup>22</sup>And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.' <sup>23</sup>And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, 'How can Satan cast out Satan? <sup>24</sup>If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. <sup>25</sup>And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. <sup>26</sup>And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. <sup>27</sup>But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

#### *Allegations of the scribes*

<sup>28</sup>Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; <sup>29</sup>but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin' – <sup>30</sup>for they had said, 'He has an unclean spirit.'

## ***The true family of Jesus***

<sup>31</sup>Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. <sup>32</sup>A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' <sup>33</sup>And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' <sup>34</sup>And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!' <sup>35</sup>Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

Mark 3.20-35 NRSV'

## **Comments and Questions**

Three stories about misunderstanding or rejection of Jesus prepare the way for the parable of the sower in chapter 4.

Mark combines two traditions of stories here, one about the rejection of Jesus by family and relatives (see also Mark 6.1-4; Matthew 13.53-58; Luke 4.16-30), and the other an accusation that he is a sorcerer and possessed by a demon. The first theme, about rejection by family and true family (3.20-21 and 31-35) suggests that Jesus' natural family think he is unbalanced, but Jesus' true family is revealed as those who do the will of God (3.35). Sandwiched between these two sections is the more serious charge against Jesus made by the Jerusalem scribes: that he is possessed by Beelzebul and casts out demons by the prince of demons (3.22). Jesus begins his response with a rhetorical dilemma: 'How can Satan cast out Satan' (3.23). Jesus says that is Satan suffers internal division then his reign is at an end.

Jesus then gives a short parable about the plunder of a strong man's house (3.27). We should note that John has described Jesus as 'the stronger one' (1.7). Jesus has plundered the house of Satan. The seriousness of the charge is indicated by Jesus' countercharge, that his accusers are committing the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (3.29). There is irony here, for we know that Jesus will later be condemned on the charge of blasphemy (14.64).

The 'unforgivable sin' has been interpreted in various ways over the centuries. St Augustine (354-430) exercised a major influence by

describing it as final impenitence and resistance to God's grace.<sup>2</sup> St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), an Italian Dominican friar, listed categories: despair, presumption, impenitence, obstinacy, knowingly resisting divine truth, and envy of the spiritual wellbeing of others. In the Calvinist tradition it has been seen as the sin of resisting divine truth with malice. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that, while no sin is absolutely 'unforgivable', some sins represent a deliberate refusal to repent and accept the infinite mercy of God; a person committing such a sin refuses God's forgiveness, which can lead to self-condemnation to hell.<sup>3</sup>

On the theme of discipleship, begun in 1.16-20, it is stated that Jesus forms a new family with those whom he explicitly calls as well as those who gather around him to hear his teaching and do God's will.

## **Quotations**

### **1**

Despair is the price one pays for setting oneself an impossible aim. It is, one is told, the unforgivable sin, but it is a sin the corrupt or evil man never practices. He always has hope. He never reaches the freezing-point of knowing absolute failure. Only the man of goodwill carries always in his heart this capacity for damnation.

Graham Greene, 1904-1991

### **2**

I say, therefore, that he sins against the Holy Spirit who, while so constrained by the power of divine truth that he cannot plead ignorance, yet deliberately resists, and that merely for the sake of resisting.

*Institutes of the Christian Religion* / John Calvin. 1509-1564. Book III Chapter III Section 22

<sup>1</sup> *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Sermo* 71.

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1864.