

SERMON FOR THE 10TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD

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I wonder if you have ever seen the movie 'Patch Adams'. It stars the late comedic genius Robin Williams. It is a film very loosely based on the life of the doctor Patch Adams. In the film, Williams' character Patch Adams is a suicidal hunter who commits himself into a mental institution. Once there, he finds that using humor to help his fellow patients gives him a purpose in life.

It is quite an amusing film though can be over sentimental at some points. But the interesting thing is not so much the film itself but the story behind the real Patch Adams. Patch Adams became a doctor as a young man but was disillusioned at the health system in the United States so envisioned to build a free, full-scale hospital and health care eco-community in West Virginia. Its goal is to integrate a traditional hospital with alternative medicine.

Adams urges medical students to develop compassionate connections with their patients. His prescription for this kind of care relies on humor and play, which he sees as essential to physical and emotional health. He himself is a clown and uses

this to help bring laughter and care especially amongst those who are the poorest.

And that is the point that the film and Patch Adams' real life work is trying to express, it wants to offer an alternative vision to that of the current American health care system. Adam's point is that the very powers and institutions that seek to help people can often ignore or dehumanise them, as is the case in the American health system, where you need expensive insurance to receive certain medical care.

Often times those very things designed to produce good can work against good. And that is in fact what we see in today's Gospel, though perhaps not at first sight. For it is a complex reading, full of a variety of themes and images. Some of these are completely beyond our realm of experience – casting out of demons, Beelzebub, the healing of the sick, and the rambling crowd.

But what is clear is that Jesus is accused by two groups of people of firstly being of Satan, and secondly of being mad. This first accusation comes from the 'scribes' - those people who were experts in the law, and represented one of the religious institutions of Israel. The second from none other than his own family, those who represented stability and blood bonds. And what is startling – even disturbing, is Jesus' response to both these groups.

To the Scribes he responds by declaring that if he is of Satan then how can Satan cast out Satan? And to his family's accusation of madness he declares that his true family are not those of blood but in fact those of the crowd.

And with these two responses Jesus sets up a direct antipathy with the religious and his family. For the religious saw Jesus drawing on a great power to perform exorcisms but fatally misidentify its source because he does not behave as they expect a righteous person to behave, which is to say, most of all, that he is not one of them. He associates with the wrong people, breaks Sabbath laws, and blasphemes by forgiving sins, and so they commit the greatest blasphemy of all.

For Jesus' family, their desire is to bring him home because they are afraid he has gone mad. Jesus responds to his family's wishes by looking around him at the crowd of misfits, crazies, and his relentless undiscerning disciples. Saying 'This is my family'.

And so we are left with an unsettling state of affairs. These two groups of authority, the religious and the family which are committed to maintaining domestic and religious life in the midst of troubled times are in fact the outsiders. From Jesus' perspective these familiar and essentially benign institutions are beyond the pale of his ministry.

For Jesus' radical ministry is for everybody: Gentiles, Jews, the poor, the demented, the sick, working class, women, tax collectors, sexual outcasts. The only people who provoke Jesus' intolerance are his family and the normal, law-abiding citizens.

Jesus' disordered love of humanity feels like falling off a cliff into chaos best symbolised by the demonic or insanity, thus the accusations. But this is the will of God, to follow Jesus into the unknown, the seemingly chaotic.

And therefore the text confronts us with an understanding of Christian institutional and family life that is challenging and daunting. Quite apart from whether the relatives were his natural siblings, the text confronts the church with a central reality of being a follower of Jesus' way. This reality is expressed by the fact that being a follower of Jesus and doing God's will is living out this form of discipleship, a form that bids us to a new solidarity with all of humanity.

It is a discipleship that offers an alternative vision to the dominant institutions of religious and family life. It goes beyond such categories' to envision a world where the least and the last are offered dignity, love and hope.

It is the same vision that Patch Adams himself embraced. A vision that declared that all people should have access to the essentials of life, in his case - free health care with compassion and humour. It is a vision that states that those things that

sometimes exist outside the normal definitions of institution or family should not necessarily be cast aside. But instead should be listened too, respected, even when we may disagree. It is through this process of relationship building and listening that we come to understand those in our world, and become followers of Jesus, as crazy as it may seem.