Mark is a really cleverly written book and the writer of Mark, uses many literary techniques to highlight theological truth within the narrative. One of these techniques is to sandwich theology or revelations, events within narrative.

Mark uses narrative to sandwich or bookend his theology, in today’s reading we come across the first of these Sandwiches. We start with Jesus family and then move to his critics and then return to his family and followers, like all traditional evangelical sermons the writer of Mark gives us 3 sections or points to consider.

3 responses to Jesus’ life and ministry. The opening section, (v21) telling us about Jesus Family response to his ministry, then in v22-30 the writer moves on to tell us about the less favourable response from the religious leaders to Jesus’ ministry and then in the 3rd section where we are brought back to think about family, Jesus true family v33-35 those who do God’s will.

In section one, the first slice of bread, we meet with a caring, but confused family. Jesus is heading home after what could only be described as a hectic start to his ministry in the first 3 chapters of Mark, he has been Baptised, spent 40 days in the dessert being tempted, gathered the 12, healed the sick, preached to great crowds and challenged the Pharisees about fasting and upset the High Priest by questioning the maintenance of the Sabbath.

This first section of the reading, the family response, belongs purely to Mark. Mark was one of the primary sources from which Luke and Matthews wrote their Gospels, it may be that they chose to redact this bit as it didn’t show the Holy Family in the best light!

After all they were considering stopping the ministry rather than supporting it, maybe when Jesus heard of their plans this seeded the comments, he makes in the 3rd section about who is his true family!

Let’s consider what may have been the motivation for Jesus family to “take charge of him, to restrain him.”

Some theologians consider that this was an act of concern, caring for the son, who is on the edge of a break down. The family would have heard the rumours, about Jesus, he was overstepping the mark, he was upsetting the temple, he had run off into dessert for 40 days, he was losing the plot and their reaction to this was like that of any family, lets gather him in, shielding him from all the pressure, giving him some respite. The keep him safe until the madness passes and he returns to the carpenter’s bench.

Others suggest that they would have been aware of the controversy that was following him. Mary and the Jesus siblings had lived in a garrison town and were faithful Jews, they could see the storm clouds on the horizon, they could see that if their son was to continue on this course, he would become a threat to the Romans and upset the Temple. I would imagine that as Mary watched, the words of Simeon would be racing around her mind, he is destined for the rise and fall of many in Israel and a sword will pierce your own soul too.

I guess that these reactions are normal and very human, if we see someone burning out, or running headlong into danger, we try and shield them, even the Son of God.

And that is the great strength of family, the care and love that is held within the family unit. I think that there is something of great joy in this section of the reading, Jesus might not have been fully understood, but he was fully loved, his family wanted what they saw as the best for him, to stop, to rest, to allow the dust to settle, to allow time for the temple leaders to calm down and the empire to lose interest in the radical Rabbi.

So, in the first section we see people responding the Jesus the man, a man loved, misunderstood, but loved. Jesus’ family may have not fully comprehended the magnitude of who he was but they loved what they knew, they wanted to care for him, to protect him, to be alongside him, maybe this is great picture of faith, God not fully understood, but fully loved.

So for now we leave the family alone, and dive into the filling of the Sandwich, the argument with the temple leaders, if you are going to rattle as many cages as Jesus did you are bound to wake up the occasional wild beast, in this case the teachers of the law, the religious leaders.

The charge levelled at Jesus was that he was in some way a sorcerer and that he was using evil powers to heal the sick. The religious leaders of the day share that the power by which Jesus heals is from Satan, Beelzebub, the Lord of the flies and NOT form God.

The fact that Jesus is performing miracles is not challenged this is taken on face value, as they and the crowd would have witnessed the healing miracles, the charge relates to the power by which this is done.

This is a really cleaver move by the temple leaders, they can’t deny the healings as they and many would have witnessed them, however if they were to attribute the healing to the power of God, they then need to recognise Jesus as at the very least a prophet or THE MESSIAH, so by declare that Jesus is using evil to drive out evil, they have acknowledge the miracles done, circumvented the divinity of Jesus and also start to discredit him with the religious of the day.

But Jesus was wiser and quicker than they imagined and turned their argument on its head. Jesus hits back with a parable, he relates the spiritual accusation to very human terms “How can Satan cast out Satan? 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. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. 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”. Jesus was pointing out in a way that would be clearly understood by any listening just how weak the argument was.

But more than this Jesus then goes on to say that by saying that he heals through evil they are guilty of a greater sin as they have equated the work of God’s Holy Spirit to the work of the evil and are therefore guilt of Blasphemy, which according to Levitical law (24v10-16) was punishable by death.

Jesus calls this the unforgivable sin, because if the Holy Sprit working in him is in fact the spirit of Evil, there can be no forgiveness and no salvation, no forgiveness of Sin.

This is the meat in the sandwich- we like the temple leaders are faced with choice to either accept Jesus for all he says he is or deny him completely.

This is a question that has rattled on since Jesus’ ministry started, there is no denying the historical Jesus, there are too many non-Christian references to him in the records of the roman empire, the question is, who was he, Son of God or a lunatic?

As CS Lewis wrote in Mere Christianity ““I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

In the final section of the reading Jesus re-opens the thinking around family, 2nd slice of bread, the reaction to Jesus’s ministry displayed in the first section of the reading is a very human and caring response. Jesus’ mother, and brothers are worried about him and wanted what they considered would be the best for him, but they are judging things through a limited lens, the lens of human thought.

Jesus asks us to try and expand our vision to try and be open to the leading of God. To expand our understanding of belonging Jesus’ words Who are my brothers, mother, family are words of welcome and invitation, welcoming those who sat with him that day into a new relationship with him, not just followers or friends but family, brothers, and sisters, sharing the same values, the same DNA.

Whilst Jesus was obviously referring to the 12 newly appointed apostles, those familiar with Mark’s gospel will know that they were only chosen just before Jesus set of home at the beginning of our reading, so really new to the job, but he was also throwing the opportunity to belong to him wider than this, throwing it open to all who do God’s will, to you and me.

Jesus’ rebuke of his birth family seemed harsh, who are my mother and brothers! And I am sure that Mary and Jesus’ brothers may have had a few things to say to him after his harsh words, but it did not seem to be too damaging to their relationship, as in Acts 1 12 - 21 when the Church is gathered to chose a new Apostle to take the place of Judas, Mary and Jesus brothers are there at the Church meeting.

So, we have three responses to Jesus.

The first is very human. His family saw the trajectory he was on, if he continued to fly in the face or the empire and the Synagogue and concluded that the only explanation for this behaviour was insanity and he needed to be taken care of, until the madness passes. I wonder how many people have set out to follow Jesus and not had the support they needed from family and friends to see their faith grow.

Secondly, we have the response from the religious of the day. Jesus’ radical preaching and teaching had started to upset the apple cart, they could not deny his ability to heal, so they were faced with a choice, a difficult choice, they could accept him as the Messiah, but this would mean, adaptation and changing the way that they related to God and each other, the other option was simply to try and discredit him.

So often an encounter with Jesus leaves us in a similar position, we have experienced the presence of God, and that has challenged us, inspired us, or pulled us up short and then we have to decide what to do with that experience. Do we dismiss it as it a momentary lapse of reason, something to be discredited and remain where we are, or do we embrace the new thing, and start a new walk with God?

Thirdly we meet with those who decided to follow Jesus. Following Jesus can be a risky business, it is counter cultural. Following Jesus requires us to love one another, to turn the other cheek, to give and not count the cost, but it is also uniting us as the family of God.

An encounter with Jesus always demands a response, the question is what is our response to him today, what is our response to the question Jesus asked the disciples at Caesarea Philippi – who do you say I am?

And how does your answer affect the way you live?