

Donnybrook

24 January 2022

Welcome

Nowadays, to describe something position as “binary” is regarded as a kind of clinching argument. The fictional parade example was the invitation to reflect on the sound of one hand clapping. Still, it is true that other cultures are better able to hold the tension of opposites than we are.

Topic

There’s a good example in today’s gospel and we might wonder what to do with it.

Steps

In today’s Gospel, we read a consoling sentence: all people’s sins will be forgiven. And then, just a few sentences later, we read: let anyone blaspheme against the Holy Spirit and he will never have forgiveness. It is puzzling and more than a little disconcerting. How can both be true?

A first step might be to explore the sayings historically. Historically, it is likely that Jesus actually did proclaim a general amnesty: All people’s sins will be forgiven. It is historically unlikely that he spoke about the sin against the Holy Spirit. The proper context for such a teaching would have been the gift of tongues in the early communities, such as Corinth. An anonymous prophet felt the need to pronounce against resistance to the Spirit. So, the two sayings come from different layers of tradition.

Still Mark juxtaposes both teachings in a stark way. This means first of all that the sin against the Holy Spirit is not an exception to the general amnesty. This would be binary thinking along the lines: all sins can be forgiven but there’s one exception. Resistance to the Spirit is not one sin among others but instead is a fundamental frame of reference, a kind of foundational direction of life. A line from later in the Gospel can help us here. The father of the epileptic boy in chapter 9 declares: I believe, help my unbelief. St Augustine knew this in his famous prayer: Lord, make me chaste, but not yet. I believe, Lord, help my unbelief. That ambiguity is the human condition. Luther put it well: *simul justus et peccator* both justified and a sinner. No binary thinking there – these two things can be true at the same time, as we know from our own experience.

Conclusion

Within each of us there can be both acceptance of the Gospel and resistance to the Spirit. Our task is to be honest about it and then to make choices of greater integrity and integration.