

Sunday 30th September 2018
Trinity 18 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Numbers 11.4-6,10-16,24-29
NT: James 5.13-end
G: Mark 9 38-end

Stumbling Block

I am not sure if the Rector is testing me with the lectionary readings I have been given in recent weeks my last sermon subject appeared to be an exposition on cannibalism and here today I find myself having to try and explain a Gospel reading which appears to be expounding the virtues of self-mutilation! You can let me know at the end whether I have passed the test. I like many people have a love of musicals and my favourite musical by far is Les Miserables it's one with a great message of redemption told through many beautiful songs, one of which is entitled 'Stars'. The majority of this songs is a solo piece, sung in its entirety by Javert, a police inspector, explaining some of his reasonings for pursuing the law the way he does, written perhaps as a response to today's gospel.

One of the lines from the song reads;

“And if you fall as Lucifer fell

You fall in flame!

And so it must be, and so it is written

On the doorway to paradise

That those who falter and those who fall

Must pay the price!”

To falter and to fall is to stumble.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus warns his disciples then and us as his disciples today, about the dangers of causing either ourselves or others to stumble.

As Christians, that is followers of Jesus and as a church, the last thing we want to be is a stumbling-block!

The passage from the lectionary in the Gospel of Mark today would not find itself into a book of favourite bible verse. It has Jesus speaking of people being thrown into the sea with millstones around their necks and then he advocates chopping off parts of our bodies that cause us to sin and then speaking of being thrown into hell! Jesus is clearly using metaphors and hyperbole, he doesn't advocate literally chopping off our limbs, neither does he envisage people burning in perpetual fires of hell. Nevertheless, it is not some of his more cheerful stuff. Let us try and get to the bottom of what is going on and make sense of it. There are some very real everyday issues which are raised by this reading.

In Hebrew, placing a stumbling block before 'the blind' is known as 'lifnei iver'. 'The blind' normally refers to anyone who is unaware, unsuspecting, ignorant or morally blind. So, this teaching concerns how our actions affect someone else. Interpretations of 'lifnei iver' prohibit Jews from, for example, giving bad advice to someone in the hope of profit, doing something that will cause someone else to sin, lending money without witnesses present, because that would tempt the borrower to deny they had borrowed, selling things that may harm others, even sitting at home and doing nothing, because all people have a responsibility for what happens in the world. In other words, each person is responsible not only for what they do, but also for how other people act because of their interaction with others.

What implications could this have in the modern world of business and in our church life?

So stumbling is the theme of our reading today – stumbling in the walk of faith.

Jesus warns of two different dangers in this passage –causing others to stumble and causing ourselves to stumble. These are very serious issues. As Christians and as Church the last thing we want to be is a stumbling-block. What, then, do we need to watch out for?

Firstly we need to watch out for causing Others to Stumble;

The Twelve think they've unearthed a scandal: someone outside their elite circle has been caught in the act. Doing what? Sinning? No. He was acting in Jesus' name (in this case, casting out demons in his name).

“Terrible! We're the Twelve! That's our job. That's our privilege” (verse 38).

And how ironic that is. Earlier in chapter nine, none of the Twelve could exorcise an unclean spirit from a boy. Now here they want to forbid someone who is doing the same thing, but successfully.

So, Jesus says (verses 39-40), cut out all your elitist rubbish. Stop resting on your supposedly privileged status. He was acting in my name – that is, the man was acting under the authority of Jesus. How can that be wrong?

'In the name of Jesus' isn't simply a formula to stick on the end of a prayer, it is meant to express the reality of a life lived under the reign of God, and therefore with his authority.

By any reckoning he is a disciple. He has a God-given ministry. He is doing the works of the kingdom. What on earth are you doing opposing him, says Jesus?

And so Jesus amplifies this positively and negatively.

Positively he says that if you act compassionately (giving a cup of water to a disciple, verse 41) that will please God.

Negatively, he talks about the perilous danger of causing 'one of these little ones who believe in [him]' to stumble (verse 42). Note that the 'little ones' are those who believe in Jesus. I believe Jesus is saying this: you're in danger of causing a believer to stumble, by trying to prevent him from exercising his ministry. You won't let him, as it were, 'give a cup of water'.

Now where does this challenge us? What are the ways in which we might risk causing other disciples to stumble?

So each one of us might ask the question, am I causing others to stumble? Am I preventing other people from acting in the name of Jesus? It's very serious if we're doing that.

And secondly causing ourselves to stumble

So, who's up for a spot of amputation? Jesus' solution to sin appears to be that is that you cut off your hand or your foot and tear out your eye. It sounds like the terrifying examples of Sharia Law that we sometimes hear reported from Saudi Arabia, doesn't it, where thieves have their hands forcibly amputated as a criminal sentence?

Jesus, as a good Palestinian Jew, uses graphic, real-life language, not to call us to engage in extreme examples of self-harm, but to make a radical point about discipleship. And so, while I can let you off the hook with regard to the literal content of the words, one thing we can't avoid is the point he's making. Nothing is meant to get in the way of whole life discipleship.

Some of us have taken the slogan 'Everything in moderation' and seemed to think we can have sin in moderation. Not in the eyes of Jesus. We can't cherish our favourite sin.

There are no exceptions. It isn't acceptable to say, 'But I've always had a temper,' or, 'It's just the way I'm made'. Help is always available from Christ and from his people as we hold ourselves accountable to one another and support each other. But the bottom line is the bottom line. It has to go.

And I would venture that if we take not just this passage, but the wider New Testament witness it isn't just a question of outright sin.

The writer to the Hebrews speaks both of 'every weight and the sin that clings so closely' (Hebrews 12:1). Sometimes we take good things and make them into a weight. Instead of receiving things with gratitude to God we take them with greed. We turn an aspect of God's good creation into an idol and worship it.

You know sometimes in our Gospel readings we hear words of great hope and encouragement, but there is no getting away from today's reading and its message. Jesus makes it quite clear that we need to be mindful of the ways in which we can be stumbling blocks to others and to ourselves; he shows us that there is no middle ground, just a choice between two destinies in eternity – one full of the Father's presence, the other empty of it.

At least the last two verses of today's reading and indeed chapter nine do give us a sense of mission as Jesus talks of this need to be like salt.

Salt is good (despite what the dietitians say), it can give food flavour and make it more desirable and so Jesus tells his disciples and us to do just that, to show a better way to live and to make the world a better place to live in.

Fr Bill Addy