

**Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> September 2021**  
**Trinity 17 (B)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Numbers 11.4-6,10-16,24-29**  
**NT: James 5.13-end**  
**G: Mark 9.38-end**

I am one of those people who can proudly say that I lost weight during lockdown. I can't prove it, because I never weigh myself, but things clearly improved. Even so, I have not quite got round to Couch to 5K. I almost took up running and was eloquently persuaded by someone (whom I had better not name) that I should do it. He sold it to me well, showed me the app on his phone and which settings he used; he told me how he went out after dark so that no one would spot him, and he showed me how much weight he had lost. After such a testimony, I went out and bought some training shoes and a suitable pair of shorts. All set to go... and then the enthusiastic advocate for running was arrested. Well, I thought, that is clearly what happens if you do Couch to 5K, and so although the app remains on my phone, I have not started. I don't want anything unfortunate to happen to me!

It is very easy to persuade yourself not to do something. Inaction is very often the default. Our Gospel passage this morning talks about stumbling-blocks and gives bold teaching about removing them: "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off... And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off." Obviously this is the *reductio ad absurdum* of rhetoric, but the point is clear. Now, I have to admit that I find this quite an appealing message because I feel that I am too old to be conciliatory where there is no prospect of moving forward. We are at that point at the moment in the Church of England: there are elections to General Synod going on at the moment and the big issue is that of human sexuality. It seems to me that the time for moving forward has come and we cannot be held to ransom by those who say that

they will leave the Anglican Communion if one of other result is obtained on this issue. The will of the majority of members of the Church of England is clear, and that might be unpalatable to some. The Creed which we shall join in affirming in just a few moments after this sermon was fought out in Councils of the Church in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries and those who struggled with consensus either had to fall into line or head for the door. If we believe in the action of the Holy Spirit in our church, then we have to allow for a conclusion which challenges us.

I could continue with an entire sermon on a similar topic, but it would not move us on beyond an understanding that the Church has to grow and develop and our understanding of our faith today may not be the same as the understanding of our forebears. Some issues have, over the centuries, created stumbling-blocks for the institutional church. In our conciliatory age there have been attempts, such as over the ordination of women, to say that a stumbling block is not a stumbling block and that everyone can be happy at once. The result – unsurprisingly – is that no one is happy with a compromise which does not work. A stumbling block is just that, and it needs confronting.

But although this passage can clearly be applied to the arguments of the Church, the words attributed to Jesus are not about the Church but about us as individuals. Do not, says Jesus, put a stumbling block in the way of believers. It is about our behaviour towards other people within our faith community: what place do we have to deny the faith of others and make their devotion more complex. This is the same question as before, but about individuals and not the church. Do we have the right to drive others from our churches? In fact this sits completely at odds with what we have already seen about the institutional church because it suggests that we should not do anything which causes a problem with

another's faith. It is a conundrum, because sometimes different beliefs are irreconcilable. Those who left the Church of England over the ordination of women, and those who will leave over same-sex marriage, are working out their own faith in the light of where they find the stumbling blocks.

This is then a reflexive question, because we have to ask where our own stumbling blocks are. It is easy to blame others for putting barriers in our way, just as the Gospel passage suggests, but where do we find our own stumbling blocks? If we do not make this a question about our own faith then the Gospel today remains remote. Navigating between belief and certainty is tricky, because certainty itself is a stumbling block: this has to be the case, when we find others with conflicting views within our own faith tradition. In our second reading today from the Letter of James, it says, "If anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death." I find this difficult because of the arbitration on wandering from the truth. Who has the right to decide upon that truth, and it is that certainty which seems to me to be our stumbling block. Shout your belief with confidence, but never claim certainty.

We create our own stumbling blocks far more than they are made by other people. The principal stumbling block will always be when we have our own answer without a reference point. This is, of course, true for all aspects of life, but in our personal faith it must be when we make a reference point which does not include listening for the presence of Jesus Christ amongst us. You can listen to sermons, say your prayers, or read the Bible, but there is no reference point without an openness to Christ. The stumbling block is making our own truth. This relates directly to the arguments within the Church: whether you are clinging to

worship or particular doctrines because they were held in the past, or whether you are finding new ones which bear little resemblance to the practice of other Christians, you cannot hold a belief if it is not validated by an external reference point and discovered in prayer.

Finding the voice of Jesus in our beliefs and in our decisions is not difficult so long as we start outside ourselves. If we start with the belief and practice of others then we know that our opinions and beliefs are not manufactured for our own convenience, but out of love for our neighbour. This is the greatest kicking away of a stumbling block, because it is when we are taken out of ourselves that we hear Jesus speaking to us. It is when we are creating our own echo chamber that we no longer hear his voice. The voice of Jesus is always found in the experience of others and that should be our starting point. If we are excluding them, then that is our stumbling block; if we are condemning them, then that is our stumbling block; if we are despising them, then that is our stumbling block. It is in the experience of others that we find our freedom, and it is in our belief that we find salvation.

Fr Crispin Pailing