

Mark 9: 38-50

We all have our favourites, our favourite colour, our favourite place to be or perhaps our favourite musical. My favourite musical by far is Les Miserables and it's one with a great message and many good songs, one of which is entitled 'Stars'.

One of the lines from the song reads;
'for 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 others to stumble and causing ourselves to stumble.

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

You may find it useful to have today's reading in front of you as we make our way through it and realize the gravity of its message.

Our reading opens with John and his statement to Jesus; ³⁸ "Teacher," we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

He could have added, 'and that's our job, we're the chosen twelve, it's our privilege!!

When you think about it this is a bit rich, as you don't have to go too far back into chapter nine to find an account where none of the twelve could rid an unclean spirit from a boy!!

So what were John's motives as he makes this statement to Jesus?

Was he trying to do some points scoring with Jesus or was he hoping that Jesus would dash off immediately and deal with this individual?

Whatever John's motives were, I'm fairly sure he didn't expect the response that came from Jesus lips.

'Do not stop him'.

This is another one of Jesus's non-negotiable statements, there's no middle ground, as he makes it quite clear to John and to us.

'Do not stop him'.

And then backs it up with another bold statement; 'For whoever is not against us is for us'.

So what does Jesus mean by this sweeping statement?

Just recently I came across this reflection based upon this very verse.

Reflection from Anne Osdieck at The Center for Liturgy

For whoever is not against us is for us.

Who is for us?

Jesus' answer:

anyone

who extends a helping hand,

who shelters the homeless,

who cares for the earth,

who feeds the hungry,

teaches the ignorant,

stands for justice,

gives a cup of water in my name, is all for us.

One of the organisations we support at St Matthews is Blythe House Hospice based in Chapel-en-le frith.

Each year they hold an event called 'light up a life', there's one coming up this November. It's a time to celebrate those who have attended the Hospice, those who have benefited from it and there is a service of thanksgiving.

Richard Mottershead who took the service said that it is love that drives the Hospice along, but left it in the air for folk to work out where that love comes from.

Whether they like it or not, whether they know it or not, that love is from God and is of God. They certainly more than fulfil the first line of that refection as they extend a helping hand and more.

How many times do we talk of individuals doing what can only be described as good works, only to back up our comments with something along the lines of; 'and they don't seem to have any kind of faith' or 'they don't go to church'.

I don't know if any of you familiar with the phrase 'a thin place', it's where there is a fine line or vail between God and the individual, a place where God can break through if only the individual could open their heart and mind.

If you were to ask someone why they do these good works, they would probably tell you that it makes them feel good on the inside.

If you were to ask them what it is that makes them do these good works, what drives them along, they may say compassion, wanting to care for others.

Personally I feel it is God given and God driven.

It's that 'thin place'.

It's that place where God is working and waiting.

Working through an individual and waiting for that person to open up to him.

God does not miss any opportunity!

So as Jesus tells his disciple so he tells us not to be a stumbling block to those who please God in acting compassionately towards others.

In the second part of our Gospel reading Jesus gives further warnings and stern warnings about the consequences of letting ourselves become stumbling blocks to others.

Quoting the NRSV version, verse 42 reads; ‘If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea’.

When you first hear or read the phrase ‘little ones’ you might think of children, but in this context Jesus is speaking of those who may be ‘young in faith’ or those wanting to ‘exercise their calling to ministry’ or those wanting to take a ‘role in running the church’.

How often do we like to have a sense identity, we are reluctant to share a task or pass on task because; well that’s my task!

Not passing on a task or being reluctant to share a task can be a stumbling block to others in their walk of faith and it can happen in any part of church life from flower arranging to service leading.

If Hilary wasn’t willing to recognise this then I and others wouldn’t be able to explore God’s calling upon our lives and try and work out His direction for us.

I recently read this very profound statement and I feel it’s worth sharing with you today, it reads as follows;

‘All too often we take our sense of personal identity, worth and value from the job we do. True self-worth comes from knowing how much we are loved by God, not by what job we do.’

So this warning from Jesus needs to be taken seriously, we do live in the High Peak and where you can find many mill stones, we are though many miles from the sea, but there is always Kinder reservoir!

There is a large section of today’s reading that can sound more like an invitation to amputation as Jesus speaks of losing a hand or a foot or an eye. The NRSV Bible puts it like this;

⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ^[e]

It makes me think of the Sharia Law as exercised sometimes to Saudi Arabia where thieves have their hands amputated as a consequence for stealing.

Indeed some Christians have taken this message from Jesus too far and have refused to become organ donors just in case their eyes would end up being used for some lustful purpose.

But amputation is not what Jesus is driving at here; it’s all about sin and what we need to do about it.

Typical of Jesus teaching, he leaves no room for middle ground, we can’t apply that well know saying ‘everything in moderation’, we can’t say ‘well I’ve always been a tempter’ or ‘I can’t help it it’s the way I’ve been made’.

Jesus is telling us that we need to seek out our sin and bring it to the cross, so that it can die there and no longer cause us as individuals to stumble.

A friend of mine was once challenged about his faith as someone said to him, ‘it’s all ok this Christianity stuff but it’s just a crutch to lean on’.

And my friends reply was: ‘well I’d rather limp into heaven on a crutch than not get there at all’.

We need to be prepared to limp in or crawl into heaven, but be ready for those words: ‘well done good and faithful servant’.

We may have gone through our confession earlier in the service, but do we need to take a closer look at ourselves and what might be causing us to stumble, or do we know someone who we can see stumbling along?

Do we need to take time on a daily basis to bring us and them to the foot of the cross?

To reinforce the point of not owing up to and doing something about our ‘problem areas’, Jesus mentions not once but three times the consequences of not seeking out our sin and dealing with it.

Three times he mentions about going to hell or being thrown into hell, where, as he says ‘worms never die, and the fire is never quenched’.

But Jesus is not talking about the kind of hell we might immediately think of.

In the original Greek the word for hell is ‘Gehenna’ and Gehenna is also the name for the Hinnom Valley, a place just outside Jerusalem where it’s residents deposited their sewage and where rubbish and the carcasses of unclean animals constantly burned.

I think you’d agree that it sounds like a less than pleasant place to be!

But what Jesus was doing here was bringing his message alive for his listeners by referring to something they could relate to.

I guess we could bring things up to date by saying that if we didn’t seek our sins and deal with them, we would be carted off to Dove Holes recycling centre and be chucked through the hatch with all the smelly rotting rubbish!
And there we would be left to suffer our fate.

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.

Salt can stop things ‘going off’ or ‘going bad’ and so we need to try and stop wrong things that are making society ‘go off or turn bad’.

Jesus tells us to have salt in ourselves so that we in ourselves do not become bland, so that as the message Bible says; ‘we bring out the God-flavours of this earth’.

Let’s pray.

Lord Jesus, help us to see you in action in others even when they cannot see you in themselves.

So that we may encourage them as they act compassionately towards others.

Help us to look inwardly at ourselves so that we may seek out that which causes us to stumble in our walk of faith.

As we bring our stumbling blocks and those of others to the foot of the cross, grant that by the power of your holy spirit they may be transformed into stepping stones for our walk of faith and for others in their journey in faith.

Amen

Every blessing

Peter