

Sermon for Hinde Street Methodist Church 10am service  
Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> September 2015

Psalm 19.7-14  
Mark 9.38-50

At our staff meeting last Wednesday we spent time – as we always do - reflecting on the readings for the coming Sunday. After we'd listened to the Gospel reading you've just heard, there was silence, and I wondered what it was about.

For some it was embarrassment. For others it was shock. For as we listened, we couldn't reconcile these words with what we know of Jesus, and wished they weren't in the bible. I guess some of you felt the same. Val reminded us of a scene in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, where a family member reads this as one of the lessons. She seems to love the punishments. But the wedding guests were troubled. Had she read the wrong reading by mistake? If not, what on earth has this to do with a wedding? And you might be wondering the same now. Why I have bothered reading it this morning. Surely there are more appropriate, more reasonable passages? Even if something similar is being practiced now, in Syria, does it have anything to say to us in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain?

As with many challenging readings, context is everything, and we need to look at it before going any further. One of the problems with the lectionary is that it divides passages that the compiler of Mark's Gospel wanted to be held together. And today's reading is one of them because it's the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> part of a passage that needs all 3 parts to make sense of it. The first part was the second half of last week's Gospel. When Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, he asked, *"What were you arguing about on the way?"* They didn't want to tell him, because they'd been arguing, about who was the greatest. What he said, and did next, shocked them. He said, *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."* And *"then he took a little child... in his arms... [and] said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'"* This was not comfortable. In their world, children were the least, of no importance whatsoever. So in his words and actions Jesus was challenging their ways of seeing things, where status and power and knowing where they stood, mattered.

Earlier in the chapter, a father asked the disciples to heal a boy with an evil spirit, and they couldn't. Now, they try to stop someone else casting out demons, in Jesus' name. These are the same disciples who've just been arguing about who is the greatest. The same disciples Jesus showed a child too, and said that anyone who welcomed a little one in his name was welcoming, him. But when someone else – an outsider - tried to claim their space and the authority they had as Jesus' disciples - they are upset because he's not one of them. Jesus doesn't agree with them. He says anyone can heal in his name. And anyone who gives them a drink of water, because they are his followers, is to be welcomed too.

This part of today's reading, relates to 2<sup>nd</sup> part of last week's reading, Jesus' scandalous words about children. And the word scandalous is appropriate here, because the Greek words for "cause to stumble" is "skandalizo." It is the sin, of causing the "little ones," to lose faith. In Matthew's Gospel, the "little ones" are Christians in general, but in Mark they're children and people on the edge. The children and adults the disciples turn away, or

mistreat, or ignore because they're not "one of us". And it makes me wonder how many 21<sup>st</sup> century people are so scandalised by Jesus' words about amputation and the fires of hell that they've not even come close enough to be welcomed. We do ourselves a disservice when we do not explain that this passage is not to be read literally, that it is full of metaphors, metaphors that were used regularly in Jesus' time and were well known as metaphors among his listeners. The list of body parts – hands, feet and eyes – are those parts of the body most commonly injured by labourers and craftsmen working in agriculture. Ancient audiences would also have been familiar with stories such as that of Oedipus who gouges his own eyes out rather than look at the children he produces with his mother. And by Jesus' time, the idea that it was better to sacrifice a body part than allow another person to fall into vice, had become proverbial. This one was well known. *"Cast away every part of the body which leads you to intemperance; for it is better to live temperately without it, than to live whole."* Jesus isn't inviting anyone to literally cut their hand or foot off, or tear their eye out, and he certainly isn't instructing those who have set them-self up as a judge over others, to do it. His point is very different.

Jesus' words challenge all of us to examine the quality of our discipleship. They are addressed to each one of us, as individuals, who live in community. And they are an invitation to us to ask some important questions. Is following Jesus at the core of our being, something we can't surrender lightly, or is it a matter of taste or convenience? Belief too lightly held, too easily set aside, is not the faith Jesus calls for among his disciples. Jesus is inviting us to let go of those aspects of our lives, our beliefs and our practices that prevent others – and on the day we celebrate harvest, we might add, the whole of creation – from living as fully, and as gloriously as God has created us all to live. He's saying in effect, that where our words and actions get in the way of others knowing fullness of life, we should be willing to let go of them.

It's easier said, than done, of course. Yesterday, I received a letter in the post from Christian Aid, telling me about the way climate change is affecting the poorest in the world. In Mali for example, the rainy season has become less predictable, and floods and droughts are far more common. Sometimes the rivers are dry and there isn't enough water to grow sufficient crops. At others times, there is too much rain, and their homes and villages as well as their crops are threatened. Fossil fuels – especially coal – are some of the biggest causes of climate change. Christian Aid asked me to send a postcard to a treasury minister asking for my tax not to be invested into fossil fuels. I've done it. It took me less than a minute. And it makes me feel good. But it's not enough. The implication of what Jesus says here is that I need to do more. I need to consider my use of power, turn the lights off, use eco-suppliers, consider whether I need to buy what I think I want – and more.

This is what cutting of a hand or foot looks like in practice now. It means considering the needs of the wider community and world as well as my own, particularly the needs of the "little ones", children, outsiders, strangers, the poor, and anyone who does not have the power, the status or the means to take action, as we do. To not do these things, is to sin, to scandalise them – because it will cause them to wonder about us, about our commitment, and whether discipleship is at the core of our being or not.

In June, my niece came to stay, to celebrate finishing her GCSEs. We were talking about what she was going to do next. It depended on her exam results, she said, but then came the surprise. She really hoped she didn't do better than her sister. Her sister is 21 months older than she is, a year ahead in school, and has always had to work harder to get good results. I don't think one is brighter than the other. They have different capacities. And the youngest, then 15 and now 16, knows this and didn't want to show her sister up by doing better than her because she knows that others will use their exam results to measure them against each. She challenged me. She isn't a Christian, but at the core of her being is an attitude that Jesus would have welcomed in his disciples, the recognition that everything we do has an impact on others. Her desire was fulfilled. When her results arrived, they added their grades up they discovered they'd got exactly the same, 'though if they had not I think she would have helped her sister through her disappointment because their relationship is more important to her than exam results. Following Jesus is an invitation to let go of those things that get in the way of others living fully. 'Though I suspect if he was speaking today, he'd leave the images of the amputations and hell fire behind, and use metaphors more suitable for our own time. Amen.

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26/9/15