

Reflection for 26 September 2021 – Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Readings

James Chapter 5 verses 13 – 20

¹³Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. ¹⁷Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

¹⁹My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Mark Chapter 9 verses 38 – 50

³⁸John said to Jesus, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' ³⁹But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

⁴²If 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. ⁴³If 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, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵And 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. ⁴⁷And 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, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'

Reflection

What is your sense of balance like? Well, if we stop and think about it, that question is more difficult to answer than it might appear. One of the difficulties that people from other countries have with the English language is the fact that some of our words we use in different ways – but you get to know that by the context in which they are used. Take the word **Church** for example. We use the same word to mean both a physical building and also the people of God – His Church which just so happens quite often to worship in a building that we also call a church. In my original question, I included the word balance. Now balance can mean whether something is level – is it in balance. Or it be used to show whether it is held up by something else – we talk of something being balanced on something else. We also use the word to mean even-handed – a balanced argument looks at both the pros and the cons. Finally, we use it in the sense of our ability to stand upright and to walk about without falling over. When we can't do that, we say that our balance is a bit off.

Falling over – or stumbling – is something that we all do at times. And it's not something we enjoy because we bruise ourselves or bump ourselves or even fall flat on our face. In our reading from

Mark's Gospel, Jesus is talking to his disciples – probably quietly and away from everyone else. Often when he was alone with the disciples, he taught them truths of the Kingdom or explained to them what the parables that he had been using really meant. On this occasion, however, his tone was stern and warning. He was trying to make them understand that all their actions have consequences. He warned them against making other people stumble by putting a stumbling-block in their way.

It was an odd warning though for Jesus to give. When he was eight days old, Mary and Joseph presented him at the Temple in compliance with the Law of Moses. However, if you remember the story, as they entered the Temple precincts, they were greeted by an old man, Simeon. Simeon was wise and full of the Holy Spirit and so, when he saw the babe in Mary's arms, he said to them " 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against,³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.'" (Luke 2: 34 – 35). What is it that causes us to fall? It might, perhaps, be temptation that causes us to stumble – but it could equally be some hazard or other that we stumble over. Simeon was predicting that Jesus would be a stumbling-block to some that would cause them to stumble and fall over. Equally, though, he would cause others to rise and shine. And here he is, thirty-odd years later saying to his disciples 'don't put anything in the way of others that will cause them to stumble'. So – what's he getting at? Well, what Jesus said and did divided opinion. Some heard what he said and saw what he did – and they loved it. You could say that they thought he was the best thing since sliced bread. Other people, however – like the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes – were more likely to conclude that he was a slice or two short of a loaf and that he'd got it all wrong. Some people reacted to his ministry by turning away – was it too hard to bear? Was it too costly for them? Absolutely! On the other hand, others found his ministry really appealing and so they began to follow him. Those of us who have had children, or seen other people's children, when they are learning to walk will no doubt remember that their early steps are rather shaky, tottery and the whole process relies on their willpower to fall over, get back up and try, try, try again until they get the hang of it.

The journey of life – just like the journey of faith – is rather similar. It isn't all easy going. Let's face it, at times it is nothing short of downright difficult! We may face many setbacks, griefs, tragedy, illness, and on top of that we make duff decisions and end up taking wrong turns. As a result, our steps may falter on any number of occasions. In fact we seem quite capable of tripping ourselves up all by ourselves. But it would seem that Jesus was concerned that, without realising it, the disciples risked making the task of seeking to follow Jesus even harder and this might put some of those who wanted to follow in the way off from persisting against their difficulties and setbacks and so reaching, as St Paul describes it, the crown of eternal life. The reality is that, when it comes to other people, we can be remarkably blinkered. Do we ever stop to think about the effects that our words, our actions, our reactions have on other people? As a nation, the British aren't terribly good at showing our emotions but, of course, that's a gross generalisation. Some of us are better at showing how we are feeling than others. So yes, we can shout and sing on the football terraces swept along by the crowd, but when it comes to dealing with serious situations, illness and death then it's a very different matter. In these situations, we hide our emotions away and don't let on how difficult we are finding life to be. The trouble with that is, because we put on the facade of being OK, we hide from other people the fact that all is not well. As a result, we can rub up against others and them having no idea whatsoever of how awful we may be feeling or the pain and suffering we may be enduring. Turn that coin around and, because we tend to be so blinkered at times about us, we just blunder into other people's pain and suffering and, totally unintentionally, make it a whole load worse.

How we treat others is of vital significance. Jesus came that we might have life – and have it in abundance. Or, to put it another way, Jesus' concern was that every person, regardless of who they are or the status that society gives them, should be able to flourish and fulfil the potential that God allots to them. That others should flourish is great news for all but especially if we are the person who is set to flourish. But when we look at others, it becomes much more difficult. We look at them and we forget that they are made in the image of God, that they have a purpose and significance that comes from God and Him alone. We look at their manners, what they eat, how they live, and we make judgements and, perhaps worse, we treat them as 'the other' rather than as a brother or

sister in Christ who needs to be valued and helped to flourish. Instead, we limit them, and we speak to them harshly and disrespectfully so that they feel belittled and unvalued. Alternatively, we look at their lives and see a life or lifestyle that we find abhorrent and despise. Those who find themselves only comfortable with what others see as an unacceptable alternative sexuality receive all sorts of mistreatment even to the point that they are told that they can only have a Christian ministry within certain set boundaries. We need to be careful not to be judgemental and see 'otherness' – be it the result of disability, skin colour, creed or beliefs, life-style or whatever – as a reason to treat people with anything less than total respect. We all bring different skills and talents into the world and into the Church – if only we are open to accepting them – and God is the creator behind them all. But we need to take off our blinkers if we are to see this clearly. If we all work together the Kingdom of God will grow. If we are divided and judgemental then the growth of the Kingdom is hampered and impeded, and we will all be the poorer spiritually as a result. That doesn't mean that anything goes – bad behaviour is still bad behaviour but if we respond to it in love and faith, we can learn together what God is calling us to do as people until he comes again to set all things aright.

Jesus told his disciples to be salt and light in the world. We need to have the courage to stand-up to bad behaviour – like the Taliban resuming their harsh penalties for crimes of theft, adultery etc – because it is only by our taking a stand that the world will become a better, more Christ-like world where the individual is welcomed and loved – even if their behaviour is not to our liking. I pray that we will all have the courage to do just that in the power of the Spirit and to the glory of the God who made us as we are.

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