

Sermon for Sunday Sept 26th for SJB and SSSC

James 5 v13-end Mark 9 v38-end

If you'd wandered into church for the first very time today and heard that Gospel reading, it might have made you want to walk straight out again! I have to confess that I groaned when I read it, but this is the place we've reached in our weekly reading of Mark's gospel and we can't avoid it. But such grotesque language! Cutting off hands and feet and tearing out eyes? Fire and worms and hell? It certainly needs some unpacking and it's been used, when taken literally, in horrific ways. The Bible is a very dangerous collection of books and needs to be read with great care!

Jesus is indeed the human face of God himself, but he comes in the flesh as a first century Jew, who, at thirty years old, takes on the role of a radical itinerant rabbi, that is a wandering Jewish teacher. He's the most challenging, radical rabbi there's ever been, either before or since. His teaching turns the world upside down and inside out. But before we continue along that line of thought, there are a few things we need to clear up. Things first century Jews would get straight away but which we may not.

South of Jerusalem was a ravine called Gehenna, known as hell. It had previously been notorious for pagan infanticide and it was regarded by the Jews of Jesus's historical time as the place of the final judgment of everything wicked. It had become Jerusalem's rubbish tip where refuse was constantly being burned. Undying worm and unquenched fire were stock images for the destruction of evil, used particularly by their great prophet Isaiah, which they would know well. Salt and fire were their purifiers. Salt was essential in times with no refrigeration to preserve food for the winter. Without salt they would have starved. All people would have understood that until relatively recently. We have a bit of a strange relationship with salt now, don't we, as it's been overused to a dangerous extent in so much of our processed food, but without the right amount of salt, food is bland and tasteless. My grandma used to advocate a pinch of salt in everything except custard!

So, as Christians, we're not to be bland and insipid, like salt that has lost both its flavour and its ability to preserve and purify.

Just before the start of our reading, Jesus has rebuked the disciples for arguing about who will be the greatest among them. He then takes a toddler in his arms and declares, "Whoever welcomes one of these little ones welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Radical indeed because, as we heard last week, in that society children had to be seen and not heard, especially in adult company, and their opinions didn't count at all.

Just before this Jesus has asked his twelve chosen disciples, who've been close to him for two years by then, just who they think he really is. Peter has declared him to be God's messiah, the anointed one, the one promised by the prophets. He's sternly told them to keep it to themselves for now and been trying to teach them what that means.

He will not come out as an earthly ruler, making them top nation as they hope and expect, but will very soon have to undergo great suffering, be killed and rise to life on the third day. They simply cannot take that in, again as we heard last week. He has to repeat it several times and they still don't understand until after the events. Hardly surprising. It's difficult enough for us to get our heads round after 2000 years of hindsight. Added to this, they seem to want to compete to be best disciple and that inhibits them further from taking in his teaching about his kingdom, where all people are equally loved and valued by God, where those who are weak and vulnerable and lowly in the eyes of the world are especially treasured, and where the greatest honour is to be the servant of all.

Jesus will soon demonstrate this by washing their feet, the lowliest of all servant tasks, before being falsely accused of blasphemy and sedition and crucified. Three days after the authorities think they've got rid of him for good, he will rise from the dead and continue to inspire through his Holy Spirit far, far into the future. History, deep study and our own human experience have shown us, that strange as it may seem, this all makes sense of the constant battle between good and evil that we see all around the world and also in our own lives, tempted as we are in all kinds of ways to be less than our very best selves.

It offers us meaning and hope, regardless of whatever life may throw at us at any one time.

Against what looked 2000 years ago like insurmountable odds, here we are studying the words Jesus's disciples finally took to heart, words being read this very day in churches all around the globe.

So, at the beginning of today's passage, here is Jesus with a toddler in his arms, desperate to teach his disciples so much that is vitally important while there's still time, and they're still getting it wrong. His ministry is about pitting the forces of good against the powers of evil and demands all the resources possible. But the disciples don't want anyone not in their gang to be ministering in the name of Jesus. Again he rebukes them saying, "He who is not against us is for us". They're still not getting what he's saying and his grotesque, exaggerated metaphorical language is a wakeup call, not only to them but to his followers down the ages and now to us. Using strong and even grotesquely exaggerated language was the stock in trade of the rabbi. The stronger the language the more important was the point being made. Cutting off hands and feet and tearing out eyes is about dealing urgently with anything getting in the way of taking in and acting on the teaching being given!

Jesus now calls us to engage actively in the battle between good and evil and to love and serve all our neighbours. If there are things getting in our way of following that call, then we too must deal with them...pride, stubbornness, hardness of heart, prejudices, fears...whatever they may be.

I for one don't really want to hear this difficult stuff, much less to preach about it. If we didn't have the lectionary we could just pick and choose the comforting bits of the gospel, but today that's not an option.

As we wrestle with these things today though, unlike those first disciples, we do have the benefit of 2000 years of hindsight! We have the examples of all those countless millions who have kept the faith and handed it on to us.

One such person who's always inspired me is a physically very frail but spiritually extremely strong little lady of ninety three, my Aunty Win.

I've finally been able to visit her in Grimsby in the week just past, for the first time since lockdown, and it was wonderful. I made a point of telling her how grateful I've always been for the way she passed on her own deep faith to me and no doubt to many others. We talked of our times of trial and doubt and how the power of prayer has kept us going.

St Martin's church, where she'd served faithfully for very many years, had been flourishing when I was growing up there but for some years it had been in decline and was finally locked up, the garden full of weeds. The last few times I'd been up there I'd just stood by the padlocked gate and weed tangled railings and prayed and wept. This time I'd decided not to put myself through that again, but somehow I felt inexorably drawn to have just one more look and, wonder of wonders, I noticed that the unkempt grass had been cut, the gate was open and someone was actually going in. I drew closer and saw a notice: "church open 11am-2 pm today. Come in for a cuppa and a cake and a chat". It was 1pm! In I went and had the most amazing conversation. A small group had apparently been faithfully praying for a new vision for this church for some years. It was now reopening and the first baptism had been held in the very font where both I and my goddaughter had been baptised. A newly ordained, newly retired teacher was in charge and all kinds of exciting new plans were afoot. They kept talking about the amazing power of prayer! When I told Aunty Win about it, she shed tears of joy. She said she'd been praying for revival there for a long time! She'll soon be receiving home communion again too.

So today, it feels as though we're being not only strongly warned, but also greatly encouraged, to stay Christ centred, constant in prayer, serving our neighbours in love. If we do and we remain ready and alert for God to go on surprising us, we can be Confident that he can, and he will!

Alleluia! Amen!

