



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.
Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Think of a time when you sought to inject a sense of urgency into a situation. How do you do this, and what were the results?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 124

If it had not been the LORD who was on our side
– let Israel now say –
if it had not been the LORD who was on our side,
when our enemies attacked us,
then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;
then the flood would have swept us away,

the torrent would have gone over us;
then over us would have gone the raging waters.
Blessed be the LORD,
who has not given us as prey to their teeth.
We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken, and we have escaped.
Our help is in the name of the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

You're invited to reflect on those things you wish to say sorry to God for, in a time of quiet meditation.

Hear the gracious words of our God:
your sins are forgiven.
Amen

Reading Mark 9:38 – 50

Sermon

Today's Bible reading is one of the most challenging to wrestle with throughout the whole of the New Testament. We might go as far as to say that the imagery Jesus uses is shocking at best and repulsive at worst, to the point where one commentator imagines the majority of preachers shying away from engaging with it. Certainly, it is quite interesting to notice that I am yet to meet anybody who has severed their hands, feet or eyes because they have caused them to sin, yet I have encountered conservative Christians of both Evangelical and Catholic persuasions who insist they never ignore any biblical texts, and always take the literal and face-value reading. Now, it might be

that such people are simply morally superior to the rest of us, hence giving them no reason to remove a hand, foot or eye in order to gain entry to the Kingdom of God. Alternatively, it might reflect reluctance to be honest about sinning for fear of the brutal consequences if the plain meaning of these verses is taken. However, I reckon the reality is that, despite claims to the contrary, faced with challenging verses such as these, even those most attached to notions of the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture recognise that it requires careful analysis and considered interpretation.

To that end, recall how Jesus had just taken his closest disciples to task because of their bickering upon the way to Capernaum and the house in which they were staying. They had been busily arguing as to which of them was the greatest, perhaps as a distraction from an inability to understand what Jesus had been telling them about how being the Messiah meant needing to suffer, before rising again from the dead (Mark 9:30 – 33). Jesus called them out, telling them about how if they wanted to be first, they needed to be last and the servant of all. He then placed a small child from the household in their midst, and explained that to welcome a little one was to welcome him and, in turn, God the Father (9:34 – 37). The conversation then switched to their having sought to prevent someone from casting out demons in Jesus's name because he wasn't one of their grouping, triggering the collection of deeply troubling sayings we have heard today.

Having told them not to intervene when others were casting demons out in his name because such people were unlikely to speak against him, he explained that anybody not against them was effectively on their side. He then moved to make it clear just how serious all of this was. The common factor linking the statements brought together in Mark 9:42 – 47 is stumbling. In the first, he speaks of causing others to stumble by setting traps; the Greek word translated as 'stumbling block' literally means a hidden trap into which unsuspecting animals might fall (9:42). The latter three concern stumbling oneself, in such

cases because those parts of the body associated with action – the hands, feet or eyes – have been misused. All four point to the grave consequences of causing or falling into stumbling, an emphasis not softened by Jesus's reference to saltiness as fire and as purification in the face of his friends bickering over their relative status. Treated as a unit, even as it is probable Mark brought these sayings together from varied and rather different contexts, highlights how the Twelve needed shocking out of their inward-looking complacency.

This realisation is, I believe, the key to making sense of this reading. Jesus was not using shock tactics for the sake of it, but precisely to wake his friends up to the sheer urgency of the situation facing them as they journeyed on towards Jerusalem. The people of Israel were reaching a real crisis point, with the religious establishment erecting barriers to keep the poorest and the most vulnerable away from God and violent rebels seeking to overthrow the hated Roman occupiers by any means necessary. The Gehenna Jesus spoke about, usually translated as 'Hell', was the smouldering rubbish tip on the outskirts of Jerusalem to which the city would find itself reduced if Israel didn't change course. The disciples were acting as if unaware of this crisis looming over God's people. Having failed to grasp the deep urgency of Jesus's ministry and mission, their complacency led them to look inwards instead, and get lost in jockeying for relative status between themselves. In my view, this is why Jesus used language which was so extreme – not because he wanted anyone to be drowned for their getting in the way of others acting in his name, or out of some desire to see disciples mutilate themselves in order to follow him – but only because this was the best way to make his friends take the situation they faced seriously enough.

So, what of us, then, as modern readers of this undoubtedly difficult text? What are we to make of it all? Well, Tom Wright's commentary on this passage makes the point that discipleship is not for the faint-hearted; it is a really costly and demanding business, which if taken

seriously shocks us out of our own complacency. Research looking at attitudes to religion shows that many people nowadays adopt that which could be called a 'pick and mix' attitude to spirituality, running with what feels good from whatever tradition it comes from, and thus weaving together, in Wright's view, a spiritual comfort blanket which protects them from too much challenge and change. While one may argue that this take on what it means to be a spiritual person is more than a little cynical, approaches to faith that focus solely on personal fulfilment or inner peace are, in my view, fundamentally inadequate. After all, Jesus wasn't crucified for telling people to be nice to others but because the radical inclusion he practiced made him just too hot to handle. Discipleship in this mould is costly and it leaves little room for complacency in the face of injustice.

In what ways are we complacent in today's Church? Are we serious about discipleship, even when that means letting go of those things which are good in-of-themselves but get in the way of ministry within an age of crisis? Are we more concerned with keeping the institution going than with building the Kingdom of God? Might we be wrapped up in how we have always done things to the extent that we risk not spotting the new things God is doing? Jesus has no desire to watch his disciples fight among ourselves, but only to see his Church grow in depth, and maturity. So, maybe we need hard sayings like this to shock us out of our complacency. It is certainly true that this Gospel reading isn't easy either to hear or to preach on, but to return to that commentary I mentioned at the beginning, while some may choose to avoid this particular passage, I agree that it is important to preach on this *precisely because* it is hard to hear. Remaining salty requires being purified as with fire (9:49), and that's what these verses serve to do.

May we have the courage to heed their challenge. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing

God of all our journeys,
as we go forward into the rest of the week,
may you be the light to our path and the breath we breathe,
and may the blessing of the Father, the Son and the Spirit
be with us and those whom we love and pray for,
now and forevermore. **Amen**