

St Brandon's, Sermon for 26th September 2021.
Psalm 19:7-end, James 5:13-end, Mark 9:38-end
See our sins
Alison Hobbs

Some of you might be suspecting that I had looked at the readings coming up and deliberately put the baptism family off until 12.30 – it's one of those passages that really gives the wrong message: when we are meant to be at our most welcoming and accessible, we say, "We'll hang a millstone round your neck and drown you, cut off your hand and gouge out your eyes ... oh, and by the way, there's coffee after, and do come back next week!"

I think we are hearing an exasperated and irritable Jesus trying to push home a point to his disciples who are exhibiting rather poor behaviour, as they would see, if they only stopped to look at themselves. But that's half the problem, isn't it? We don't see our own foolish and poor behaviour most of the time, and I think that's a link running through all today's readings.

So look at those disciples. In the verses immediately before today's readings it says,

(Mark 9: 33-34) 'Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.'

Mmmm.

And now, four verses later, John is reporting that they had tried to stop someone casting out demons because he was not a follower, not one of them. Jesus' answer suggests that where the healing is happening, and demons are being cast out, belief and faith are not far behind.

The disciples are to take a more inclusive view: those who are not actively working against us are as good as on our side.

Besides, faith is a gift, not something to be owned, or an achievement.

The disciples are focussing too much on their own status, or lack of, and their own authority, as they see it, to stop and see the evidence of God at work.

But it is terribly difficult to recognise these sorts of sins within us. They get subtly mixed up with things we think are good and to be applauded.

- 'The world' applauds wealth and making money, and we are alert to keeping an eye on that. But suppose the money just might be put to charitable use (might), can we hear ourselves sliding and justifying ... do we really know our motives?
- The ten commandments seem pretty black and white but Jesus pointed out the every shade of grey when he talked about not just refraining from

murder but refraining from calling another a fool: killing the respect owed to another made in the image of God.

- We act to save our own face, pointing the finger at others, denying our part and looking to cover our backs.
- We act to please others to get approval for ourselves, looking for that human approval to be our reward before looking to see what God's path might look like.
- We avoid being fools for Christ: standing up and speaking out.
- So many small and seemingly insignificant actions, hardly harming, hardly misdemeanours in our eyes. And yet, we know, when we remind ourselves that to sin is nothing more or less than to turn away from God, to ignore him, over-ride him, to ask him to follow us and bless our plans instead of us following him and looking to share in building his kingdom.

How easy it is to be the keen, zealous, adoring disciple, ready for all action: surely the best, surely the favourite, the greatest among them?

The psalm picks up on this, asking, 'who can detect their errors?'

'Who can tell how often they offend? O cleanse me from my secret faults!'

The hardest to spot can be these 'presumptuous sins', the sins of pride:

'Keep your servant also from presumptuous sins lest they get dominion over me; so shall I be undefiled, and innocent of great offence.'

Great offence? Isn't that a bit strong for an act of pride, of presumption?

Jesus' words show that he takes sin very seriously, suggesting it maims and threatens to kill us spiritually if not checked.

Saying to his disciples that it would be better for one of them to be forcibly drowned than to cause a fellow, would-be disciple to stumble.

That it would be better for them to cut off a limb than to keep sinning and lose all sight of God – to take themselves to hell.

Note: God is not doing the maiming.

Jesus is not saying this is the punishment he is going to carry out. No, he is pointing out that the consequences of persisting and going deeper into sin, further from God, are so deadening and damning that it would be preferable to take such drastic measures on oneself if that is what it takes to stop and turn back.

He is, of course, exaggerating for effect. To get through to his disciples, the risk they are taking by falling away from his teaching, or causing others to do so.

When he teaches them to pray, half the prayer – the Lord’s prayer – is taken up with asking not to fall into temptation, to forgive and be forgiven, and be protected from evil, the time of trial. That’s how important it is.

The Catholic church tradition views confession and absolution as a sacrament, that is, an outward sign of an inward blessing. That personal act of contrition and repentance, to which the priest responds with the absolution: asking for the grace of redemption and new life to pour down.

I heard a talk yesterday by Philip North, Bishop of Burnley, who said confession is the moment many young people give their life to God, on the annual Pilgrimage to Wolsingham.

The Church of England’s tradition is to corporate confession, and the words we use in our shared confession recognise the subtlety of sinning: *‘in thought, word and deed, through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault’*. We largely restrict it to a liturgical action built into the service rather than a personal act of reconciliation, an individual making confession before God in private through the intermediary of a priest.

Now James, in his letter to the early church, says something very interesting and challenging about confessing our sins. He says, *‘Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.’* It may be that James is continuing to refer only to the elders of the church as those who pray over the sick and sinning but in the translations I have looked at, it seems wider than that to me, and therefore, pretty challenging. (And anyway, who would we define as an elder?) Would I be better off making myself vulnerable with a trusted friend by asking them to pray for my self-confessed short-comings?

And if I am as unable to see many of them as the psalmist has pointed out, do I trust them to point them out in love? Because of my desire for self-protection, I find this a massive challenge.

I also note that James says *‘if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and cover (forgive) a multitude of sins.’*

This is serious stuff.

I know from other texts that ‘the Truth will set me free’, and to wander from the light of truth towards darkness is to risk getting lost because I cannot see, and a guide with a torch would be a welcome help.

It even made me wonder if there is a correlation between the impossibility of seeing God's face and living, and the impossibility of seeing my own internal face and living, but for the intermediary of the Holy Spirit and the fellow disciple.

Jesus urges his disciples to purify themselves – talking of salt and fire which are agents of purification – and the salt of friendship among them: *'Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'*

This is an unfinished sermon, one that each must write the concluding paragraph for themselves. And may you find God blessing you as you do so.

Amen