

Sunday between 26th September and 1st October [26]

Mark 9:38-50

The real benefit of the 3 year lectionary that we use is that we can, week by week, follow the same gospel reading and experience a fuller picture of what the writer was documenting. This week's gospel reading follows directly from last week when we heard that Jesus and his disciples had gone to a house in Capernaum and after Jesus found out that the disciples were trying to work out who was the greatest, Jesus used a little child to demonstrate how the disciples should be prioritising their relationships. They should value service over power, welcome over self-importance.

So today, we hear how the conversation continued. The disciple John asks a question about how Jesus' followers should respond to people they don't know doing good works in Jesus' name. It was perhaps Jesus' speaking of welcome and service that gave John pause. We can imagine that the disciples had witnessed or heard about this behaviour and become quite defensive – doing the work of Jesus is OUR job, who do these people think they are? We were chosen, we are being taught by the Lord, we know how to do it properly, they are just copying us and probably don't know why and how this works, this is dangerous. Does that sound familiar?

We might recognise such thinking from other areas in our own lives or even within our ministry work. Perhaps we or someone we know has had their nose put out of joint by someone new coming in and taking over a ministry or we have worried about the activities of a different church group in our area and their messages to the community. It is quite a common human trait to be a bit defensive, wary and even cynical of what a different person or group is doing and their motivations. But Jesus is clear with his disciples here, he tells them – if they are doing good works in my name then they are with us – whether we know them or not. That famous phrase of Jesus, whoever is not against us is for us, makes it all sound so simple.

Make no mistake, it is that simple – but something that is simple is not necessarily easy to do. Our human nature regularly leads us to be interested and even judgmental of others, even when we are actively trying not to be. But Jesus' next teaching makes it clear that we each need to be mindful of our own path and not those around us. Jesus follows his support for strangers doing God's will and joining the mission of God with a warning that if their motivations are nefarious, they will be judged accordingly. We might then expect Jesus to explain to his disciples how they can spot the bad practitioners and stop them while leaving the good to get on with it, but Jesus does no such thing.

In fact, Jesus goes on to warn the disciples to mind their own motivations, actions and words when he challenges them to disciple themselves when they realise they have sinned. Jesus' words are incredibly dramatic here – if you sin with your hand, chop it off, if it's your eye, pluck it out. This is not an easy lesson to hear and we can walk back a little from the physical nature to accept this is a challenge to hold ourselves accountable for our own sin. What it isn't, however, is a challenge to hold other people accountable for theirs – God will judge, we have no rights or responsibilities there. Our call to disciple ourselves to live exemplary lives is the only effect we should imagine we can have on others.

We can be absolutely certain that as much as we might see flaws in other people and wish to change them or their behaviours, we will have the most success when we turn the lens on ourselves and practice self-reflective discipline. Instead of wondering what the other person did wrong in an argument we should ask ourselves what we contributed to make that encounter difficult. Now, it may be that we did everything we could to make peace, but we should always seek to be sure. As Jesus said at the end of the reading today we are called to have salt in ourselves and be at peace with each other.

Having salt in ourselves is a reference to being an enhancer of a situation. Just as salt enhances the flavour of food and preserves food that remains good to eat for longer, so salt as a metaphor relating to people should be understood as a reference to enhancing relationships and preserving peace between people. Our call is not to fix other people's brokenness, it is to be at peace with all by recognising and controlling the effects of our own brokenness.

There is a wonderful story attributed to an unknown monk in the middle ages that goes:

When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world.
I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation.
When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family.

Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family.

My family and I could have made an impact on our town.

Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world.

May we all heed Jesus' teaching and call to us to be salt in the world, and at peace with each other worrying less about how those around us live, work and worship, and rather focussing on our own unique and life changing relationship with Jesus.