

Community resistance & solidarity (Mark 9: 38-50)

Another Exorcist

38 John said to him, '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.

Temptations to Sin

42 'If 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.

49 'For 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.'

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

Servant ministry and social boundaries (9: 38-41)

Ministry is either an opportunity to make the gospel real for people, or a means for building a power base. That is the stark alternative presented here by John's objection to an exorcist who was ministering in Jesus' name, but was not part of the group.

Mark loads this exchange with irony: John is objecting to the success of this "outsider", when the disciples themselves have been notably *unsuccessful* in exorcising the boy with a spirit (9: 14-29)!

What Jesus objects to is the notion that the new community is the only space in which God's grace is authorized to operate. The disciples/apostles are not the sole franchisees of Jesus' ministry of preaching, healing and exorcism. Importantly, being "messianic ministers" has nothing to do with enhancing their personal

authority, privilege and power.

What, then, is the significance of being “insiders”? Ministry doesn’t exhaust what being church means. It is fundamental, because it is about the Good News becoming concrete in people’s lives. But it is the transformed community that is itself the most potent witness to the reality of the gospel and therefore of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaims. We all recognize exceptional people – whether exceptionally saintly or evil! They are, by definition, exceptions to the norm. In building a messianic community, however, Jesus is seeking to establish an entirely different norm: a community structured by the dual commandment to love God and neighbour. It is a community of resistance to the powers; a community that is non-violent and in which leadership and ministry is habitually exercised in the form of a servant.

To stress this importance of the community/church is not to exhaust the places where ministry “in Jesus’ name” can operate! That is why the unnamed exorcist is able to minister in Jesus’ name, but outside the community. And Jesus rebukes the disciples for their inability to recognize the good operating outside their community – particularly because it is driven by concerns of personal advantage!

This is an important lesson for a church that lays enormous store by the ministry of Word & Sacraments. If you want to see the value the church places on different ministries, follow the money. For all its rhetoric of valuing lay and ordained ministry equally, the United Reformed Church spends 80% of its money on ordained ministers of Word & Sacraments. That money is generated from lay people, who then usually have to provide money for their own training over and above their contributions to M&M.

This creates a culture in which it is very difficult for ministers to avoid the temptations that face the disciples in this passage. It also exacerbates what Jesus sees as a problem: the drawing of inappropriately rigid in/out boundaries around the church. Unlike us, Jesus does not lay stress on what ought to be believed (orthodoxy); he is far more concerned with doing gospel stuff and being Good News

(orthopraxis).

Community solidarity in the face of persecution (9: 42-50)

This is one of those passages whose meaning depends on how one interprets the most likely context of (a) what Jesus is talking about and (b) what Mark intends to convey to his own church. The dominant trend in traditional exegesis has read this section of the gospel as Mark intending to recount a summary of Jesus' teaching on several important (though independent) matters: on greatness (vv33-37); in/out boundaries (vv38-41); temptations to sin (and/or child abuse) (vv42-50); divorce (10: 1-12).

The horrific stories of child sexual abuse that have become tragically regular news stories – particularly of abuse by clergy – have prompted preachers to turn to this passage as a statement on Jesus' views on the subject. Ironically, while what they say on the subject reflects Jesus' own attitudes, it is unlikely that either Jesus or Mark is addressing that particular subject here. Rather, as we will see next week, he addresses it in the context of the question of power and violence within the family (10: 1-16).

This is a difficult passage and requires some explanation. We need to start by recognizing that the term Jesus uses here, "these little ones who believe in me" is not the same as "little child/children" in 9:36/10:13. It is quite deliberately intended to connect with "child"; however, Jesus doesn't suggest that children are "disciples" in the sense of following him around, and with injunctions to "deny themselves, take up their cross and follow". That is why we probably ought to read "These little ones who believe in me" as *vulnerable disciples*, who might easily be caused to "stumble" (ie abandon following Jesus). Let me try and unpack that.

The verb Mark uses here means literally, "to scandalise", and is traditionally translated as "to stumble". It is a pun: faith means "following Jesus on the road", so "stumble" means, "to stop following". "To scandalise" (prevent from following) is a technical term in Mark for rejection of the Kingdom message (6:3) or desertion of

The Way (14: 27, 29).

It isn't a warning against child abuse. Instead, it needs to be read against the context of the Roman Occupation (in Jesus' time) and the crushing of the Jewish revolt by the Romans - the situation of Mark's church immediately prior to 70CE. Jesus was leading a "revolt" against Rome; it was to be overthrown by the Kingdom of God. It was not an armed uprising, however, but an alternative way of living in the world - something to be learned and lived out by following Jesus.

Mark's church understood itself as the contemporary expression of Jesus' original disciples, whom Jesus is teaching in this passage, away from the crowd. It was a non-violent, alternative "community of resistance". It refused to worship the Emperor and prayed for the end of the Empire and the coming of God's Kingdom. It was subject to fierce persecution. Under enormous pressure, some members were abandoning their faith; others were betraying their Christian brothers and sisters to the Roman authorities. How should the church treat people who had "caused others to stumble" and sold out their companions? What sort of internal justice should the community operate? The justice operated by the rebel groups was well-established: traitors and sell-outs were executed.

I am suggesting, in other words, that we ought to read Jesus' uses of the term "these little ones" as a contrast and rebuke to the terms the church would be tempted to use about members who had caved in and sold their church family out: "scumbags"; "traitors"; "Judas!" etc. This is what non-violence means: it means being merciful. The church, under persecution, ought to be a rebel community in which the "normal" ways of dealing with betrayal had no place.

That is not to say that Jesus doesn't recognize the seriousness of betrayal. This is the context in which he goes on to talk about cutting off limbs and poking out eyes: people who have betrayed the community need to be cast out. But, as with Jesus' "An eye for an eye", it ought to be seen as a "statute of limitations" – an act of mercy. In this context, "cutting off offending body parts" was a form of leniency:

traitors and sell-outs were to be expelled for the safety of the rest of the community, but could and should be restored if they wished it through forgiveness.

This makes sense of his next strange-sounding statement about being “salted by fire”: salt and fire were used to close amputation wounds. More importantly, “sharing salt” with someone (ie eating with them) was a sign of peace. The church is to be a non-violent community of peace that, in the context of this section, embraces the good outside the community (the exorcist), cuts out the bad, and works for resolution of conflict on the basis of welcome and forgiveness.

Our own churches might not be facing persecution and the temptation to sell out our brothers and sisters; this is a good opportunity to remember the church in those parts of the world where being disciples of Jesus is outlawed and punished – sometimes by death.

It is also a good Sunday to wrestle, in our own context, with the ways in which we damage people within our churches, so that they abandon trying to follow Jesus. The church might not be the only place where God’s grace operates, but it certainly destroys faith in the reality of all that we proclaim when it is a place from which God’s grace, love and peace are singularly absent!

Going deeper into the text (Mark 9: 38-50)

Jesus’ hardest words are reserved for those who “scandalise” the little ones who believe in me”. The call to amputate the offending hand, foot, and eye in verses 43-48 are by any account strange and troubling.

Mark seem to be combining the Pauline metaphor of the community as "body" (see “hand, eye, foot" in 1 Corinthians 12:14-26) with the Pauline principle of not causing the "weaker member" to be scandalised (see Romans 14). But think of the modern analogy of the struggle against addiction. The process of recovery often feels like

part of oneself (the addicted, co-dependent part) is being amputated.

"Any struggle with addiction. . . involves deprivation," writes Gerald May in *Addiction and Grace*. "Every false prop is vulnerable to relinquishment." Such "amputation" is life-saving surgery on the cancer of our illusions and appetites.

According to Mark, our greatest individual and social addiction is the will to dominate. Disciples are called to defect from what society may see as natural, such as all the ways "little ones" are routinely victimised by patterns of hierarchy and exclusion. But to do this is to be perceived as "defective" (like the amputee) by the dominant culture.

These strange sayings, then, are arguing that it is better to be deformed than to conform to what oppresses more vulnerable members of the body politic. In a world of violence and institutionalised inequality, the choices are stark. We either embrace the "fire" of recovery (9:49) or live in the "hell" of addiction.

How can we us disciples embrace the "fire" of recovery?

All age worship ideas (Mark 9: 38-50)

One of the keys to good all age worship is to keep it simple and relatively short. Ideally aim for a service of 45-50 minutes. That's not to say a service can't be longer but if you are thinking of 1hr30+ think carefully about your use of space and above all else be creative, take risks and have fun – partying is integral to the kingdom but we'll leave that for a year on Luke...

Reflections - There are similarities in theme to the passage from John 15 where Jesus talks about God acting like a gardener and pruning in order for new growth to come and for fruit to grow. The deadwood is taken away to be burned.

Here the imagery is much more graphic, even violent and deliberately so. Outside of Jerusalem was a rubbish tip that was kept burning constantly - 'Gehenna'. That's the word Jesus uses and is both literal and metaphorical as people had already started to compare it to their understanding of hell.

To cause others, particularly the most vulnerable, to turn their back on God...well just don't, is effectively what Jesus is saying. If there is stuff in your life that gets in the way of faithful living then remove it! There are no half measures when we follow Jesus. We can't live in two separate worlds.

In the context of Mark's gospel Jesus holds up the Kingdom of God in stark contrast to the Empire. No-one can live for both because they have very different purposes. One is keeping people subject to the power and control of Rome whilst the other is opening people to the abundant gift of life and liberation that God reveals in Jesus. So if a believer sets an example that suggests you can keep a foot in both camps and others trust and follow that example then the foot in the Empire camp needs to be removed. Better to die a Roman death, says Jesus, with a millstone round your neck!

Anything not of the kingdom is worthless and worthless rubbish gets chucked on the fire in the tip.

Ideas - Reduce, reuse, recycle – cover the communion table with recyclable rubbish (or any table if that is going to be too upsetting for people) Invite everyone to come and get a piece and take it back to their seats and invite them to think about where they need God to reduce the influence of the world in and/or on their lives.

Remind everyone that grace means God does not let go of us. Jesus does not try to scare us into submission but is trying to bring home the seriousness of the consequences when we obstruct, neglect, abuse or cause the most vulnerable to stumble in their walk with Jesus. Forgiveness is always within reach and God longs to re-use us and transform us into something even more useful and beautiful for him. Perhaps ask for examples, and have some examples ready, of things that have been

recycled into something completely different – old tyres into playgrounds, old paper and card into bedpans

Craft idea – have tables with lots of scrap materials like yoghurt pots, cotton reels, linen, card tubes, boxes etc. and invite people to make a cross – either individually make a small one or together make a large one on each table. Remind that Jesus walk led him to a rubbish dump where the cross he carried was raised and he was crucified on it. At the depths of human waste God reveals perfect love. A Roman execution that declares the victory of the empire is turned on its head by the purpose of God becomes the symbol of freedom for the whole world.

Words from Isaiah 61.1ff may be appropriate

Prayer idea – Invite people to write things they wish to lay aside or for God to prune (on post-it notes or strips of paper) Assure them that no-one will see what they write. Invite them to throw their paper in a bin (preferably metal) then ask everyone to follow you outside and take the bin to a place still visible but safe enough to set alight. Perhaps have a corporate prayer ready to share as together you watch the flames rise and the rubbish is consumed.

Liturgical resources (Mark 9: 38-50)

What a difficult text but for today our worship will focus on stumbling and the majority of our resources will be around confession.

I found this **introduction** from faith and worship helpful:

Confession and repentance are at the heart of the Christian faith. They are at the turning point between unbelief and belief, and they are the continual reminder to us that our earthly natures are very close to the surface.

In the same way that we cleanse our hands by washing as we begin a day, so it is good to remind ourselves in prayer that without the presence of God's Spirit in our

lives through the day, we are likely to stumble because we are stained by the consequences of sin.

Confession earths our lives in the love of God, keeps us humble and enables us to be a blessing to others through the day.

Read more

at: http://www.faithandworship.com/prayers_Repentance.htm#ixzz5B3Wk1s00

God of healing,
God of wholeness,
we bring our brokenness,
our sinfulness,
our fears
and despair,
and lay them at your feet.

God of healing,
God of wholeness,
we hold out hearts and hands,
minds and souls
to feel your touch,
and know the peace
that only you can bring.

God of healing,
God of wholeness,
this precious moment
in your presence and power
grant us faith and confidence
that here broken lives
are made whole.

Read more

at: http://www.faithandworship.com/prayers_Repentance.htm#ixzz5B3X2NBxu

Unclutter our lives, Lord
we have too much,
consume too much,
expect too much.

Grant us perspective;
to see this world
through others' eyes
than just our own.

Grant us compassion;
where there is need
to play our part
not turn aside.

Grant us gratitude
for what we have,
our daily bread
the gift of life.

Unclutter our lives, Lord,
give us space,
simplicity
thankful hearts.

Read more

at: http://www.faithandworship.com/prayers_Repentance.htm#ixzz5B3XASh00

You call us to love

as you love,
care as you care,
seek justice,
mercy and truth
in a world that has yet to feel
the warmth of your embrace.

But we fail to heed your call,
draw back from those in need,
say nothing when we see
injustice.

Become invisible.

Forgive us, you whose love
is better than life,
you whose Grace extends to all.

Forgive us, and enable us
to be the people we could be,
that your name might be
on the lips of all people.

Amen

Read more

at: http://www.faithandworship.com/prayers_Repentance.htm#ixzz5B3XUgsgu

Lord, we have come to see that our lives fall far short of your glory.

Have mercy and forgive us.

Lord, you have given your life for us, and poured out your Spirit,

Yet we fail to return your love with all our heart.

Have mercy and change us.

Too often we are selfish and proud,

Ignoring you, Lord, and neglecting others.

Have mercy and cleanse us.

Lord, when we do not truly trust and obey you,
We are overwhelmed by self-pity, fear and worry.

Have mercy and deliver us.

In Christ we are given a sure hope and secure love,
Yet we follow the false hopes and desires of this world.

Have mercy and forgive us.

Father, through the redeeming death of your Son on the cross,
By your Spirit and through your word,
Transform and renew us to follow you with joy.

www.sundayservices.anglican.asn.au/docs/confessions.rtf

Our heavenly Father

Thank you that you love us and care for us all the time.

We know that this week we have not always lived

The way you tell us.

We have done wrong things

And not done all the good things we should have done.

Only you can save us,

So please forgive us

And help us to live as your friends.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

www.sundayservices.anglican.asn.au/docs/confessions.rtf

*Awesome and compassionate God,
You have loved us with unfailing, self-giving mercy,
but we have not loved you.*

*You constantly call us, but we do not listen.
You ask us to love, but we walk away from neighbors in need,
wrapped in our own concerns.
We condone evil, prejudice, warfare, and greed.
God of grace, as you come to us in mercy,
we repent in spirit and in truth,
admit our sin, and gratefully receive your forgiveness
through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.*

*Eternal Splendour, Light of light and God of gods,
You have shone upon us and we have seen your glory,
shining in the face of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Bathed in your light, our faith and our life are shown to be shrouded and tarnished.
We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength;
we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.
Yet, in your great mercy you forgive what we have been.
We pray that you now will amend what we are
and direct what we shall be,
that we may henceforth walk in your light,
delight in your will, and reflect your radiance,
to the glory of your holy name. Amen.*

[/www.reformedworship.org/.../true-confession-ideas-recovering-true-spirit-conf..](http://www.reformedworship.org/.../true-confession-ideas-recovering-true-spirit-conf..)

We confess guilt, Lord.

Guilt for the things we have done
and said
and thought
and that are yet to be forgiven.

Guilt for the things we have done
and said

and thought

and from which we have already been forgiven.

Free us from guilt, we pray,

and set our feet upon your path of freedom.Amen

Nigel Warner

Some prayers of confession that work well as intercessions

When we hear the voices of self-doubt,

Telling us we are worthless,

That we are weak and can do nothing

And change is beyond our grasp:

God, who has made us in your image

Give us the power of your Spirit to learn and grow,

And to work with you towards a new creation.

When the vulnerable are exploited,

And the trust of the innocent betrayed.

When the strong seem invincible

And the weak have nowhere to turn:

God, who sides with the poor

Give us the power of your Spirit to resist evil

And to work with you towards a new creation.

In a world crying out for peace,

Where conflicts seem hardened into steel

Where war and poverty uproot families and homes,

And those seeking refuge are treated as criminals:

God, who made the world to be one,

Give us the power of your Spirit to struggle for

Justice,

And to work with you towards a new creation.

In a church that is afraid of difference,

And sets up barriers against the outside,
Where people are fearful of change,
Clinging to outworn ways:
God, who calls us to be your people,
Give us the power of your Spirit to witness for you,
And to work with you towards a new creation.

Amen

Jan Berry

As God's creation, the world bears the marks of God.
Here we think of the world as a body, a child of God.
Ploughing a field we scratch the skin of God;
Polluting a river we stain the blood of God;
Exterminate a species and we break God's finger;
Build bigger cities and we load God's back;
Oppress the poor and we beat God's children.
Creator God, may we love the world,
your amazing gift to us,
for we meet you in all creation.

Help our eyes to see you in the mountains,
our ears to hear your voice in the waves,
and our hearts to respect your gift.

In Christ we know that we are one family
in the house of the world.

May we live, by grace, as your children.

Bernard Thorogood