

TWENTY SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (29 September 2024)

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.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us.

“For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched’” (Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48 – ESV).

Introductory notes

General

Luke alone follows Mark’s question about those who are not disciples but use the name of Jesus to cast out demons. (See Luke 9:49-50)

Matthew alone follows Mark’s “whoever gives you a cup of water to drink etc”. (See Matthew 10:40-42)

Both Matthew follow Mark with the remainder of the text. (See Matthew 18:6-9 Luke 17:1-2)

This is the only time in Mark that John is mentioned on his own. We cannot be sure why Mark does this. In fact, we could ask the question: Is there more than one John? “For other Markan references to this John see 1:19, 29; 3:17; 5:37; 9:2; 10:35, 41; 13:3; and 14:33” (J R Donahue, & D J Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002, 285).

We have here something of a pattern: The disciples, though slowly awakening to the reality of Jesus and his mission, clearly have a lot more to learn. We should not underestimate just how huge is the shift of consciousness and perception that the disciples are undergoing. It is easy for us who look back, with full knowledge of the triumphant end to the story of Jesus, to be aghast at how unseeing and even gauche the disciples were at this early stage.

The “sayings” that follow are easy to remember and are not situated within any bigger narrative. Bearing in mind that context is always a significant key to meaning, Mark gives no context here. This suggests oral tradition. One commentary notes that “the strong influence of ‘catchword’ or ‘keyword’ composition, ... is very likely a sign of pre-Markan oral transmission” (J R Donahue, & D J Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002, 290).

Later on the sayings can be recalled and situated to suit different contexts.

“The basic pattern of Passion prediction, misunderstanding on the part of the disciples, and instructions about discipleship introduced in Mark 8:31–38 is repeated in 9:30–50. After a reminder about the journey motif in 9:30, Jesus delivers the shortest of the three Passion predictions in 9:31. When the disciples fail to understand in 9:32, Jesus delivers teachings about greatness in his movement (9:33–37), outsiders who act in the name of Jesus (9:38–41), giving scandal (9:42) and being a scandal to oneself (9:43–48), and various aspects of “salt” (9:49–50). This section ends the second great Passion prediction unit with a reference to discipleship as involving service and sacrifice (see also 8:34–38 and 10:35–45)” (J R Donahue, & D J Harrington, op cit, 289).

Specific

someone casting out demons in your name: This interchange – in which Jesus says such activity is fine as far as he is concerned – opens horizons of tolerance, even universality. “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8 – ESV). There is more than a little irony here and maybe jealousy or resentment: In 9:14–29 Mark tells us that the disciples were unable to cast out a demon! Just because you are a disciple does not mean you can claim control over what God does in the world. This may have had special significance if Mark’s audience was a small and persecuted group of Christians in a sea of other religious groups and movements, at least some hostile to the followers of the Way. (The best scholarship suggests Mark’s Gospel was written in Rome in the 60s.) One commentator argues that Jesus’ response here “becomes an admonition not to discount the faith of another because he or she is not affiliated with an official Christian circle. Such a Christian may be even more effective, for the exorcist of v. 38 possessed powers beyond those of the disciples (9:18)!” (J R Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002, 292-293).

he was not following us: He was using Jesus’ name but not following “us”? Is this “a subtle way of underscoring John’s failure to understand that Jesus is the real source of the disciples’ power”? (J R Donahue, & D J Harrington, op cit, 286). This seems to suggest that the disciples expected they would hold exclusive rights to Jesus and his teaching. This is not the only time that the disciples exhibit a self-centred approach. It is going to take the brutal reality of the cross and the unexpected reality of the resurrection to draw them – drag them? – out of their tiny worlds.

whoever gives you a cup of water etc: Jesus continues to develop his tolerant and universalist understanding of the kind of reality he is bringing to birth. *Anyone who gives you a cup of water ...* Jesus’ vision goes way beyond both the self-centredness of the disciples and the law-centredness of the religious authorities. And, of course, there is the teaching in Matthew: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Matthew 12:30 – NRSV). Jesus is well aware that life – especially living in community – is far too complex to be reduced to simple black and white issues.

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin”: The Greek verb used here and translated as “to sin”, is *skandalizō*. It means “cause to stumble”. It is used, for

example, by Matthew when Jesus rebukes Peter – see Matthew 16:23. The NRSV translates it here in Mark as follows: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me”. The NKJV translates it: “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble”.

if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off etc : “There is rich material for preachers and teachers in Mark 9:30–50. The passage reminds prospective followers of Jesus that facing the mystery of the cross is essential, that greatness in the community of Jesus involves the service of others and trying to recognize his presence in persons without power or status, that Jesus’ power transcends the circle of his disciples, that scandal toward others and toward oneself is to be avoided as much as is possible, and that Jesus’ disciples must live up to their vocation to be ‘salt’ of the earth” (J R Donahue, & D J Harrington, op cit, 291).

In regard to the very violent imagery used in this text, one commentator notes: “The instruction to hack off body parts that cause one to stumble is an example of metaphoric hyperbole characteristic of Jesus and is not meant to be taken literally. Both masochism and bodily mutilation (with the exception of circumcision) were strictly taboo in Judaism (Deut 14:1; 23:1; 1 Kgs 18:28; Zech 13:6). Both Jesus and early Christianity eschewed a dichotomy characteristic of Greek Platonism that made the body and the material world inferior to mind or spirit. On the contrary, the Gospels and epistles repeatedly affirm that the body (e.g., sexual morality, financial integrity, the treatment of others) is often the manifestation of spiritual reality. Indeed, the giving of a cup of cold water in v. 41 immediately preceding attests to the spiritual and eternal consequences of bodily acts.

“The fact that a saying is not meant to be taken literally is not to diminish or discount its importance, however. If anything, the hyperbole enhances the teaching that God is more important than even those things most indispensable to us. It attests to the uncompromising offense of the gospel and of the authority of Jesus, that nothing—not even things we value supremely like eyes, hands, and feet—should stand in the way of eternal life. Justin Martyr (*Apol.* 1.15.2) quotes the reference to gouging out an eye in v. 47 with reference to chastity. In the Talmud (*b. Nid.* 13b) the cutting off of one’s hand also refers to sexual transgressions. While the metaphor in v. 43 certainly includes lust and sexual offenses, it should not be limited to them alone. The metaphors of eyes, hands, and feet are all-inclusive of what we view, what we do, where we go. Likewise, Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 1.2.54) writes that ‘a man’s dearest friend is himself; yet, even in his lifetime he removes ... from his body [nails, hair, etc.] whatever is useless and unprofitable’. Xenophon’s view of life is a polar opposite to Jesus’. Jesus does not counsel the removal of body parts because they are ‘useless and unprofitable’; rather, he signals the inestimable worth of the kingdom of God, which surpasses things of *incalculable value*. For Jesus a man’s dearest friend is *not* himself but the one God who opens to him the possibility of the kingdom of God—for the sake of which nothing—not even life itself (8:36–37)—is comparable. As important as eyes, hands, and feet are to us—or whatever else claims ultimate allegiance—they are not life; the kingdom of God is life, and nothing in this life should be allowed to prevent one from entering the kingdom. The choice is literally between God’s kingdom and ‘the fire that never goes out’” (J R Edwards, op cit, 293-294).

hell: The Greek word – used in verses 43, 45 and 47 – is *geenna* or *Gehenna*. The Hinnom Valley is a steep ravine southwest of Jerusalem. The Second Book of Kings records that human sacrifice had been practiced there under Ahaz and Manasseh – see 2 Kings 16:3 and 21:6. Jeremiah condemned the practice of human sacrifice – see Jeremiah 7:31 and 32:35. It was abolished by King Josiah – see 2 Kings 23:10. King Josiah – a reforming king of Judah in the second part of the 7th century – turned the valley into a garbage dump. Thus: “‘To go into hell, where the fire never goes out,’ became a symbol of divine wrath and punishment in subsequent Judaism and Christianity, or of the darkness, pain, and torment resulting from it” (J R Edwards, op cit, 294). You would have to say that Jesus is giving the strongest of warnings concerning what is expected of a disciple.