

Mk.9.38-end; Num.11.4-6,10-16,24-29; Psm 19.7-end; Jms 5.13-end.
27th September '15: 17th Sunday after Trinity

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Nice to be able to hear today that section of Psalm 19 from which that lovely, gentle, prayer comes.

On the other hand and at first sight, our Gospel reading today is somewhat fierce and uncompromising, incorporating as it does a number of symbolic themes, the casting out of demons; the pangs of guilt involved in the hanging of a millstone around the neck; the chopping off of any limbs that bring only hindrance; the symbol of salt as a thing of usefulness; the idea of hell - the 'living death' ever popular in modern horror fiction and films. Jesus bombards his disciples with a sequence of powerful images, none of which are meant to be taken literally; he wants them to see more deeply.

For instance, he speaks of being given a cup of water. Imagine you're thirsty – the water is fresh and cold. You feel that lovely cooling sensation as it reaches your stomach and begins to revive you. This is what true clarity is like, when a difficult decision is made, whenever a commitment is fulfilled. How much greater is the clarity in our lives whenever we say 'yes' to the call of Jesus Christ. There will always be those who say, 'O well, that won't work', or, 'we've tried that before' – experts at finding reasons not to act or to try anything new.

It's as though he's preparing the disciples, and through them, us, for all the things to come in our lives. This isn't something they can take lightly – they need to understand the seriousness of the mission. If they don't get it, they may become a stumbling-block

to him or to others, and then no fate could be worse. Their discipleship is for real; it's not about who's in and who isn't – it's much bigger than that, and so Jesus exaggerates for effect, to stress just how crucial it is that the disciples are there for him as he faces life and death. His call burns like fire; it purifies like salt.

He stresses the importance of forming an opinion over important issues, especially when speaking of the conflict between the kingdom of God and the forces of evil. This is a conflict in which no one can be neutral. Here, they, and we, really do need to take a line, or know at least where *not* to place our faith, making sure we do not obstruct any who are trying to bring that kingdom to earth. As Jesus says, speaking of the exorcist that John and the other disciples tried to stop, ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us.

Christians believe that Jesus is the divinely appointed agent for leading the battle against the forces of evil - that he offers a path to bring about the kingdom of heaven of earth. Those who wish to see the triumph of God's cause should throw themselves into following him whatever the cost. You may think that there are other important things in life, but actually there is nothing more important than this, making known the love of God in Christ on earth – because as we're all fallen, we all need lifting up to something higher.

Mark warns that it is better to enter into life maimed than to be consigned intact to the unquenchable fire. He may refer to the fires that burn continuously in the 'Gehenna' – the municipal refuse tip just south of Jerusalem. These fires had a purifying effect, reducing the risk of disease arising from decomposing organic matter. Jesus mixes his metaphors with the phrase, 'For everyone will be salted with fire' (v.9:49) – the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, the fires of persecution, can each have a purifying effect in all our lives.

So when I say ‘I’m a Christian, I’m not shouting ‘I am saved’ – I’m whispering, ‘I get lost sometimes!’ If I think of myself as a Christian, this doesn’t fill me full of pride. I’m confessing that I stumble, and that I need a helping hand. Becoming a Christian doesn’t make me strong – it acknowledges my weaknesses with a prayer for the strength to carry on. When I say I am a Christian, I don’t brag about my success, I admit that I have failed and that I can’t ever pay the debt. Christians don’t claim perfection, far from it; we try to discover and acknowledge all our flaws and rejoice that God still thinks we’re worth it. In saying I’m a Christian, I judge no-one – How can I? I have no authority except the love of God.

The gospel concludes with the saying, ‘Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.’ I think this means that peace is a lot easier to establish if we recognise that we are all lost occasionally, that we all stumble, that we’re all weak, that we’ve all failed somehow, that we’re none of us perfect. In the purification of our understandings, we are much more likely to be gentle with one another; much more likely to find the peace of Christ. That is a peace for which I most fervently pray for all of us, and want to right now,

Lord Jesus Christ,
you came to us an innocent child
and sacrificed yourself on the vicious altar of our sin and pride.
Help us now, for the sake of all the innocent children
born to this world and yet to be born,
to acknowledge that we live or die together,
all flawed, all failed, all broken;
that all may come to know the joy of the kingdom
where all are found, all are valued, and all are loved,
through the merits of Jesus Christ,
Redeemer, Saviour, Messiah. Amen.

Mark 9.38-end

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.'³⁹ But 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.⁴⁰ **Whoever is not against us is for us.**⁴¹ For 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.

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.⁴³ If 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.⁴⁵ And 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.'⁴⁷ And 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,⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

49 'For everyone will be salted with fire.⁵⁰ Salt 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.**'

Numbers 11.4-6, 10-16, 24-29;

4 The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, 'If only we had meat to eat!⁵ We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic;⁶ but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.'

10 Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased.¹¹ So Moses said to the Lord, 'Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favour in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me?¹² Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, "Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child", to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?¹³ Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, "Give us meat to eat!"¹⁴ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.¹⁵ If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favour in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.'

The Seventy Elders

16 So the Lord said to Moses, 'Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you.

24 So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent.²⁵ Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.

26 Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp.²⁷ And a young man ran and told Moses, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.'²⁸ And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of

Moses, one of his chosen men, said, 'My lord Moses, stop them!' ²⁹But Moses said to him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!'

⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; ⁸ the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; ⁹ the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring for ever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. ¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

Psalm 19.7 - end

¹¹ Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. ¹² But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. ¹³ Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. ¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

James 5.13-end

The Prayer of Faith

¹³ Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up;

and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. ¹⁷ Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

¹⁹ My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰ you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.