

**PENTECOST 18B 26-09-2021** *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Esther 7. 1-6, 9-10; 9. 20-22; Ps 124; James 5. 12-20; Mark 9. 38-50

*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 deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. 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. '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. 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. 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. , 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, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. 'For everyone will be salted with fire. 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.'*

John and the disciples were annoyed because someone they didn't know, someone who wasn't one of them, was going around exorcising people using Jesus' name. But Jesus didn't seem bothered at all and told them to let the stranger carry on because he'd soon be a believer anyway.

We humans do like our tribes, our groups and families- we seem to have a deep need to belong to something that gives us identity. In this country there's nothing like the footy Grand Final to bring out the tribalism in much of the population! Supporters even wear war paint and dress in the colours of their team.

Belonging is important to us, and it is good to feel part of something- whether it is a huge band of sports supporters, a family, a group of friends, or a parish.

The Church is a group but with some differences. The church universal consists of many, many smaller groups of denominations, dioceses, and parish churches, all connected because of Jesus.

Most groups have an entry requirement: you might pay a subscription or sign up to a set of club rules. What do you suppose might be entry requirements for the church?

*(Baptism)*

Anyone, in theory at least, can come in to a church and join in- whether they are baptised or not. Baptism signifies that the person wants to be a member of God's family and a follower of Jesus; or in the case of a baby, their parents want that for them.

When Jesus started his wanderings around the Holy Land, all kinds of people came along to see him and follow him, and he welcomed everyone.

Traditionally, Jewish people had been very particular about who could belong and be considered Jewish; you really had to be born into a Jewish family, and if you did convert you would have to be circumcised if you were male and follow a lot of strict rules. These rules for living set the Jewish people apart, and they knew clearly who was in and who was out.

Jesus did it differently because he welcomed everyone. He healed and fed people without even asking whether they believed in God or had been good people.

It took his disciples quite some time to understand this. We read about them shooing away little children and trying to keep annoying crippled people from bothering him. Jesus warned them not to put stumbling blocks in front of anyone who wanted to follow him, and he was serious- he said it would be better to be drowned than to do that.

What do you suppose he meant by 'stumbling blocks?' What might be a stumbling block today?

Some things that could be a problem for people and stop them going to church might be:

- The exposure of child abuse revealed by the Royal Commission
- Past negative experiences
- Fear of being judged or preached at
- Not feeling welcome
- Hearing falsehoods about what Christians believe

Being inclusive, hospitable and welcoming is enormously important if we expect people to come here more than once.

Jesus went on to warn us of the possibility of stumbling ourselves and spoke about cutting off hands or feet. This sounds barbaric, but remember Jesus was speaking to his community, not to individuals. If we think of the church as a body, and ourselves as members of the body, he was warning us to be careful about how we function as a community; we need to ensure that the various aspects of the body are working properly and in harmony with each other.

To recap: in the first part of today's Gospel Jesus teaches that everyone is welcome to join his family. He goes on to warn that getting in the way of those who want to follow him is a serious matter; and that there are consequences for us, individually and collectively, if we allow ourselves to be led astray.

I would always prefer to talk about God's love and compassion rather than what we might think of as the darker side of faith, but we can't afford to ignore the warnings Jesus has given us.

The Good News Jesus brings is that through him we are reconciled to God, brought back into God's family, and if we confess our sins we are forgiven. We don't have to earn our way to heaven; we can't earn it, because God's grace is a free gift.

That is not to say there are no consequences if we deliberately ignore or disobey God. Separation from God's love might not sound like much of a punishment but if Jesus describes it as hell, we'd better believe it.

Jesus promises eternal life and the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit to his people. These are gifts beyond price, and with them comes responsibility.

Jane Williams, reflecting on this and today's passage from the letter of James, writes this:

"James speaks of the joyful power given to Christians in the name of Jesus. We have been given a share of God's saving and healing power, every one of us. That immediately makes us all 'elders'. It is no longer someone else's job to care for the sick, or to notice the lost, it is ours."

It is our responsibility as a community to work together to remove any stumbling blocks that would exclude people from our fellowship.

It is our responsibility to care for one another by sharing the load; it is neither right nor fair that a small number of people do most of the work required just to keep this church functioning.

And it is our responsibility- all of us- to take seriously the mission of the church, our Lord's commissioning to make disciples of all nations- starting with our neighbours.

The Lord be with you.