

**Mark 9:38-end**

Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29; James 5:13-end

Over the years, I've been a member of quite a number of different clubs and organisations. At the moment I belong to old boys' associations and alumni associations, and in all of these cases, they're designed specifically for former students of certain schools and universities. And I'm sure that amongst all of us here today, there must be hundreds of different clubs, organisations and special interest groups, of which we have been or continue to be members. Yet when you consider the various organisations which we belong to, membership of them is usually *restricted* in different ways. It may be that only those of a particular profession are allowed to join, or it may simply be that the club caters for a very specific interest.

And so it was, in our Gospel reading this morning, that the apostle John seemed to have been under the impression that he, and the other members of the Twelve whom Jesus had specially chosen,

belonged to some kind of an exclusive 'club'. They were adopting something of a parochial / insular attitude; Jesus had called *them*, and no-one else, to be with him – had he not? Surely they were special – those whom Jesus spent most of his time teaching. And the number '12', reflecting the Twelve tribes of Israel, surely gave a completeness to their number which needed no-one else, nor allowed room for anyone else.

Of course, this kind of attitude wasn't new. We find a similar situation in the Old Testament reading from the Book of Numbers. There Joshua tries to get Moses to stop two of the elders – Eldad and Medad – from prophesying outside of the tent of meeting. But Moses tells him to let them be – besides those who are obviously chosen and set apart, there are others, too, who can be seen to serve God's purposes - "Would that *all* the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!", he declares.

And so, it's this exclusive kind of thinking we see coming from Joshua in the book of Numbers that comes to the fore when the Twelve disciples discover a guy, who was not one of their number, casting out demons in the name of Jesus. Because he wasn't one of *them* – not a member of *their* exclusive 'club' - they felt they were correct in forbidding him from doing what he was doing. But they were in for a surprise. Because the Lord tells them that they shouldn't have stopped the man from casting out demons. It's unlikely that he'll be speaking ill of Jesus if he's performing miracles in *his* name. The point is, people can only do such things if they're in a right relationship with the Lord. Now it might seem that the apostles were showing a sense of passionate personal loyalty to Jesus, but by forbidding the man's actions, they were actually opposing the work of the Spirit done in Jesus' name.

Sadly, throughout the course of Christian history, there have been endless examples of one group of Christians considering themselves to be the 'true' church, and as a result, they've tended to regard

others as *not* being 'proper' believers. And there is a danger that *we* can fall into this kind of 'parochialism' today – that somehow we Anglicans are superior to members of other Christian denominations, especially being part of the established church of the nation. So, whilst being rooted in our own Anglican tradition, it's important to be open to Christians of *other* persuasions – recognising that God can and does work in and through *them*, too. The thing is, none of our denominations in themselves have got it 'all right'. Over the years, I've increasingly come to realise that we really need one another in order to gain a deeper understanding of God's truth; we need, for instance, the great traditions of spirituality which Roman Catholicism offers; we need the Pentecostal and Charismatic emphasis upon the experience of the gifts of the Holy Spirit; we need the Methodist emphasis on fellowship.....I speak from personal experience when I say that we have much to learn from sincere believers who belong to other churches, and they can indeed be a real inspiration to *us* in our *own* walk of discipleship. Each Christian

denomination is *not* an exclusive 'club', but rather part of something much bigger; may we never lose sight of that truth.

Now amidst all this discussion of 'who's on the Lord's side', the Lord moves on to point out to the Twelve what they should *really* be concerned about – namely the seriousness of *sin*. Jesus uses some severe language here to stress the fact that sin is to be opposed at all costs – cutting off a hand or foot or tearing out an eye if these cause us to sin. Of course, this isn't meant to be taken literally, but it does serve to powerfully remind us that if we take no action to deal with those persistent sins which constantly beset us, then we face the prospect of being "thrown into hell". In the end, there are only two alternatives – eternal life or eternal damnation. The thing is, if we regard our relationship with the Lord to be of utmost importance, then there's nothing too precious to sacrifice in order to hold on to it. Of course, our contemporary society isn't too keen on the concept of sin – we try to find all sorts of ways of explaining it away, ignoring it or making

excuses for it. In fact, in today's society, folk don't like to be told that they're sinners at all. But, God's word constantly reminds us that sin is real. And as believers, we're called to lead a holy life – a life set apart for God – and that means being constantly open to the work of his Spirit in our lives, cleansing us of our sinful ways and transforming us into the people God wants us to be.

And we also need to pay careful attention to our behaviour in order not to cause *others* to fall into sin. Jesus talks of not putting 'stumbling-blocks' in the way of others who believe in him – not standing in the way of someone who enjoys a close relationship with Christ, on account of our words and actions which might betray our calling as disciples of the Lord Jesus.

The seriousness of sin and the need to repent, is underlined in the final verses of the Letter of James. Here the author refers to the need to confess our sins and to receive God's healing and forgiveness. What's more, James concludes his letter with an

exhortation to believers to bring back to the fold of Christ those who have wandered away into sin – “whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins”.

And, returning to the Gospel reading, the Lord goes on to use the imagery of ‘salt’. Now there are lots of different things salt is used for, but the thing it’s most commonly used for today is giving flavour to food. But if salt becomes *unsalty*, it’s no longer of any use at all – it can’t be re-salted – it can’t bring flavour to other food if it is itself flavourless! And so, the Lord uses this imagery here as a warning against turning away from the way of Christian discipleship. As followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, we’re meant to be *distinctive* in the midst of our society – we’re a people called to be different – a people who are called to reflect the likeness of Christ in our lives, so that through us, our Heavenly Father may be glorified. But if we lose that distinctiveness as Christians – if we lose our ‘saltiness’, as it were – what use is that?

So, in the course of our daily lives – in our work, in our leisure, amongst our friends and neighbours – are our words, thoughts, actions and attitudes consistent with our claim to be Christian disciples? Whether it be in our attitudes towards money and material possessions or prominent issues of morality, do we hold fast to *God’s* truth, or do we simply go along with the latest trends and fads in society – effectively losing our ‘saltiness’? And the same is true as a community of believers in this place, that through being “at peace with one another” we may be effective witnesses for Christ in this neighbourhood in which we’re set.

So, this morning we’re presented with a threefold challenge. Firstly, to gain an appreciation of, and have an openness to, learning from believers from traditions and denominations different to ourselves. Secondly, to pay attention to our *own* walk with the Lord, in particular, taking sin seriously and allowing God to deal with it. And thirdly, to ask ourselves, ‘how distinctive am I as a Christian in the midst of my

day-to-day living?'; 'have I lost my 'saltiness', such that I've become indistinguishable from the world?' Because, as we're reminded each time a candle is presented to someone who has just been baptised, as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, we *are* to 'Shine as a light in the world, to the glory of God the Father'.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks that, through Christ, you call us to be part of your worldwide family. Help us always to avoid parochialism, and rather to recognise our need for one another and to learn from each other. Help us to be mindful of our sinfulness, and to seek your forgiveness and transformation. And by the power of your Holy Spirit, guide us to be salt and light in our day-to-day lives, to your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.