

Zoom service – Thu 24 Feb 2022 James 5:1-6, Mark 9:41-end

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

When Toby asks me to preach, the first thing I do, after checking my calendar, is to look at the readings, hoping that there will be a thoughtful parable or an impressive miracle or a clear and connected piece of teaching.

Today, no such luck.

The reading from James is clear enough, but not very relevant to most of us. James's target is not really the rich, but rather the exploitative rich, those whose wealth is based on their failure to give those who work for them fair wages. It's still a challenge to us today; modern day slavery, minimal wages, child labour are all in evidence in this country and around the world. The reminder that 'what we do to the least of my brother and sisters' we do to Jesus is an important one. While I suspect that the Benefice does not contain many of the exploitative rich, James's message is one with which we would all agree, though we always need to consider how the goods we buy are produced. I am typing this on my iMac computer, built, I think, in China. How ethically was it produced?

The passage from Mark, is more of a challenge. How do we make sense of any argument that the writer appears to be producing? I have come to the conclusion that we can't, because this isn't an organised argument, but rather a series of disconnected sayings of Jesus, which the Gospel writer remembered and wanted to include.

If we accept that we can look at the individual sections much more easily.

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.

We may hope that we will give the cup of water to anyone who needs, and not just to those who bear the name of Christ, but the importance of the action is clear, and it will bring its reward, though that should not, of course, be the motivation.

There is a reverse side.

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.

I always assume that the 'little' ones are children, and a few verses earlier Jesus has taken a child in his arms and said; *"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."* In a country and a world where so much appalling child abuse keeps emerging, and where leaders of the church have so often been complicit or have simply failed to

respond, this is a reminder we need to take to heart. We sometimes moan about safeguarding, but thank God we take it seriously.

Then we come to the extraordinary set of self-mutilation instructions. I don't know of anyone who takes them literally. But it is a reminder that if there is anything which keeps us from doing what God wants us to do, however valuable it may be in itself, then we should certainly consider whether or not we should eliminate it from our life. A harder thought: if there is someone in our church community who acts in a way that is destructive, having done our best to help them address the issues in love, then we may have to ask them to leave. It goes against our grain, but if it causes us, individually or as a church, to stumble, it must go.

And then:

'everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵Salt 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.'

Though written as one paragraph these are three separate statements, brought together because they all mention salt.

Salt was hugely important and valuable in Jesus's time. Our word 'salary' comes from the word salt, and Roman soldiers were often paid in salt. Its value came from the many uses it had.

Everyone will be salted with fire. This is because salt and fire purify. Every animal sacrifice in the Temple had to be covered in salt before it was burnt. Salt and fire made the sacrifice pure. We too need purifying; salt does this, and the fire helps to destroy what we need to destroy, as the previous section reminds us.

Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? At first glance this is silly. Salt, sodium chloride, what comes in those cylindrical pots from the supermarket, is one of the most stable compounds there is and it cannot lose its saltiness. Two important characteristics of salt are that it preserves, indeed it was one of the only ways to preserve food before the days of refrigerators, and it adds flavour. Of course, we know we shouldn't have too much, but scrambled eggs without any salt are pretty unexciting. So, if salt could lose its saltiness, that would be bad news. If your source of salt is rock salt, the rain can leach out the actual salt, leaving you with something that has indeed lost its saltiness.

And finally *'Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'* We are called to have purity of salt in our lives, we are called to preserve the Gospel, the good news that has been delivered to us, and we are called to bring flavour, goodness, joy, that will make our lives and those of other people so much better.

No overarching theme, therefore, in today's reading, but much for us to ponder on, and to help us to direct our Christian lives.

