

STUMBLING BLOCKS

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St Columba, 30 September 2012

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

Introduction to the Readings

We have two NT readings this morning, beginning with what is known as ‘the letter of James’. Apart from v1 it isn’t really a letter, and probably wasn’t written by James! This opening was likely added later to add weight to the writing, especially as the letters Paul had written had gained popularity and significance.

Actually, the material in James counters some of Paul’s attitudes, by emphasising lived practice over against beliefs that make no real difference to living. It’s a debate in Christianity often spoken of as ‘faith or works’. The main thing for us is that James is concerned to stress that it’s the way we live that really counts – because our actions are the best test of our beliefs and values: “faith without works is dead”, he says.

Having said that, the piece we hear this morning, from the end of James, talks about prayer – but does so in the context of outcomes, suggesting that a prayerful attitude and way of living is the clue, rather than any specific words or forms of prayer.

And today’s passage from Mark says something similar: it’s our deeds that really count. Mark’s Jesus suggests – using a series of metaphors, not to be taken literally – that we’re better off without hands or feet if we don’t use them for doing good. Again, the proof of our commitment to Jesus’ message is in the way we engage with others. We are called to be salt, enlivening and preserving and healing our world, and if we don’t act that way the salt of our beliefs and commitments is useless.

Introduction

How should we live?

That's the question we've been exploring in various ways over recent weeks. In summary, we've identified just what today's readings stress: being Christian is primarily about living, living in ways that keep Jesus' message of love and hope and peace alive here, now.

1. Stumbling Blocks

I suspect most of really do work at that. Yet often we 'trip up'. I know I do. Other things distract us, push us to focus on 'me' or on next week's bills or the job – all important, but perhaps meaning we don't notice what's going on around us, and we end up not acting out love, hope, and peace where it's needed. Mark has Jesus talking about 'stumbling blocks' – things like this that trip us up. This saying might well pre-date Jesus, as it is a Hebrew form of saying, using 2 similar images in parallel to make its point.

Here the images are a stumbling block – a chunk of stone in the road that the donkey might stumble over – and a millstone – the stone the donkey hauls around to grind the grain. Even small stones in the way can cause damage – for us or for others. The 'little ones' in Mark probably refers to ordinary people, those without learning or status or power (though, with the current concern about children and poverty, we might well apply it there). It's a reminder that vulnerable people – which is really all of us, in one way or another – need care and support to live well – not stumbling blocks: nothing that makes life or faith harder.

And for ourselves, we all need to watch out for the diversions, the blocks in the road, that re-direct our energy and our focus away from acting for the good of others and the enhancement of society. The blocks might be our desire for a larger house or a better car, or even our determination to maintain correct beliefs about God or the details of Christian truth. These can get in the way of our acting out the core message of love, peace, and hope as followers of Jesus. The way we

live enacts the truth of Jesus' message. Christian living is a road, a 'way' it's called, a path to travel. Concentrating on that path, watching where we're going, will help us avoid the rocks that could trip us up.

2. **Keeping Going**

It's our actions, our living that counts. Yet woven through all this – enlivening how we live, guiding how we act, supporting us when we're in danger of tripping up – through all our acted-out faith, is the energy we call God. Our sense of God, of God's energy flowing in and around us, our sensitivity to 'what's in the wind' is very important. It's this that keeps us going.

Here we come back to James' insistence on prayer. I take 'prayer' to be code for anything that reminds us of the spiritual depth and energy that lies behind all of life, plus our efforts to connect with that. It might be traditional forms of prayer. It might be quiet times – meditation, perhaps. It might be a general attitude of 'mindfulness' we develop. It might be a conscious prod we give ourselves to be alert, sensitive, open, responsive. Paying attention to the spirit-energy in us and around us does help us keep our mind on the job, as it were. 'Mindfulness' ensures we focus our love and our attention on the people and issues in greatest need - we don't get diverted, trip over stones in the road. God's energy keeps us going, as we seek to act out each day the love, peace and hope at the centre of Jesus' message.

Conclusion

Let's keep our eyes open for anything that might cause us or others to stumble, to divert from showing values of justice and care in all we do.

It's how *we live* that presents God's message to the world.