

## Sermon - the salt of integrity

Based on the readings: James 5.12–20 and Mark 9.38–50

### The thread - and Gehenna

- The two passages set for today, from James' letter and Mark's Gospel, cover a wide range of instructions, from both Jesus, and from James, the brother of John.
- In his letter, James gives practical directions based on his experience with leading people in putting their faith into practice.
- This is complimented by the poetic hyperbole of Jesus, where he uses dramatic imagery to make his point.
- Before I pick up on one of the main threads that I think is woven throughout these two readings, it might be helpful to clarify one of the words that Jesus uses - the word *Gehenna*.
- It's in the part where Jesus says:

*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 Gehenna, to the unquenchable fire. (Mark 9.43)*
- Many versions of the Bible use the word *hell* instead of *Gehenna*, and even the NRSV that we tend to use here prints the word *hell* - but does provide a footnote saying that the original Greek is *Gehenna*.
- Jesus never used the word *hell*.
- When he wanted to refer to the place of the dead, he used the word Hades, which is the Greek name for that.
- Actually, Jesus more probably used the Hebrew word Sheol, which meant the same thing, and when the Gospel writers wrote in Greek, they would have translated the words of Jesus into Greek.
- So for Jesus, hell on earth was best symbolised by the rubbish tip outside Jerusalem, called *Gehenna*, where the rubbish of the city would decay, fed on by worms, and with parts of it burning continually.
- This is what Jesus was referring to when he described *Gehenna* as having an '*unquenchable fire*', or '*where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.*' (Mark 9.48)
- For Jesus, hell was a place in this world, and it was a place that was deeply unpleasant: full of fumes, and filth, and death, and decay.
- It was a place where worthless things were thrown out, in chaotic disorder.
- It was a place that was the complete opposite of any representation of heaven on earth.

### The salt of integrity

- Let me now describe the two ends of this thread that I see woven through these two passages, and which are conveniently located in the first verse of the James reading, and the last verse of the Mark reading:

*Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. (James 5.12)*

*'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.'* (Mark 9.50)
- The starting verses are easy: they're about integrity.
- James says that we shouldn't have to bind our promises to deep fundamental truths to demonstrate the integrity of our word.
- Rather, that our promises should be based on our own integrity - that is, that our own integrity should be something that is deeply held within each of us - and that when we say 'Yes' or 'No', then others should be able to rely on our own integrity, to know that they can count on what we have said.
- What about the other end of the thread, where Jesus uses some idiomatic expressions about salt?

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- Scholars have suggested a variety of interpretations about what Jesus might mean - but there is no consensus.
- I suggest that they could be about integrity - of having an inner consistency so that one's behaviour conforms to the same fundamental principles.
- If we replace the word *salt* with the word *integrity* for the last verse, it appears to make sense:  
*[Integrity] is good; but if [integrity] has lost its [integrity - that is, it's inner consistency], how can you [restore] it? Have [integrity] in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.' (Mark 9.50)*

### Integrity by conforming?

- Now let's work through the Gospel reading to see how the rest of the passage might be understood in the context of this thread of integrity.  
*John said to Jesus, '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. (Mark 9.38-41)*
- I think John is concerned about integrity here - the integrity of the name of Jesus, and how it is used.
- From one perspective John is right to be concerned.
- Is the person who is casting out demons genuine?
- Are they behaving appropriately, or are they misusing the name of Jesus?
- That is still a real concern today, when all kinds of people and groups claim to be Christians, and yet their attitudes and behaviour do not appear to be at all loving or compassionate.

### Integrity through serving

- However, Jesus responds by telling John to think beyond the mere use of Jesus' name, and to consider more deeply *what* this stranger was doing.
- Jesus describes the stranger's action as a '*deed of power*' - the implication being that this is about exercising power over evil forces, to bring about deliverance for those affected - deliverance from being possessed and from being bound and prevented from engaging with God's blessing of abundant life.
- We need to be careful about assessing integrity superficially.
- Rather, it is based on things that are fundamental.
- We also need to be careful about assuming that something fundamental is complex or sophisticated: it isn't.
- What is fundamental is manifested in even the simplest of actions, like giving someone a cup of water to drink.
  - (As an aside here, Jesus is not saying that people will be rewarded for giving thirsty Christians water, but not thirsty atheists. In this exchange, he was answering John about a stranger using his name, and saying that anyone who responds to Jesus' name favourably will be blessed in that.)
- Nevertheless he continues:  
*'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. (Mark 9.42)*
- At different times in the gospel accounts, Jesus seems to be referring to children, when he uses words like '*little ones*'.
- This is not necessarily always the case.
- I think that here Jesus is referring to those who are still immature in their faith development, rather than immature in their actual lives.

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- So the stranger is someone who is trying to follow Jesus in his healing of others, and in using the name of Jesus to effect that healing - but without much understanding of what he is doing or how the Spirit's power is working through him.
- The point is that he's getting on and doing it - he's manifesting God's blessing to the benefit of others.
- So Jesus warns John, who has been concerned about the stranger's integrity, not to put a stumbling-block in front of the stranger with the immature faith, and suddenly start making all kinds of demands on this person about what they should or shouldn't be doing before they can be permitted to manifest God's blessing.
- Jesus makes it clear that if you obstruct people who are enacting God's compassionate love, and enabling wholeness, that obstructiveness is so offensive that you should rather remove yourself permanently from the situation.

### Integrity salted with fire

- In the next verses Jesus refers to our own stumbling - stumbling in our faith practise - and the need to maintain our integrity, even when it seems costly to us.
- He describes stumbling as a consequence of the hand - what we do, or the foot - where we go, or the eye - what we look at.
- Whatever it is that causes us to stumble - that damages our faith integrity - we need to exercise firm discipline in cutting it out of our lives, so that we can celebrate the life God gives us, rather than becoming worthless and fit only for the tip.
- And when we allow ourselves to be refined through the fire of the Spirit, then Jesus reckons that we *'will be salted with fire'* (Mark 9.49), that is, we will have a deeper integrity.

### Prayer is integral to the whole of life

- I'm going to end by referring briefly to the rest of the reading from James.
- James describes the need for prayer, both for when you're suffering and for when you're cheerful.
- And when you find it difficult or ineffective to pray for yourself, then count on the prayers of others, and ask them to pray for you.
- I suggest that some of what James says here is also about integrity - about ensuring that we maintain our integrity in the Lord:

*The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. 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. (James 5.15-16)*

- And James reminds us that prayer is effective in restoring damaged relationships, and in restoring integrity within and between ourselves.

### Communal integrity

- This is a reminder that we are not only called to each have our own integrity, but also as a faith community, as part of the body of Christ, we are also called to deepen the integrity of our Church community.
- Communal integrity is about being in responsive harmony with each other - that is, having an inner consistency within our community in terms of how we respond to each other, and how we together respond to the wider community.
- There isn't the opportunity to explore this concept further now, but I am naming it for you to be able to reflect on it further for yourself: what does communal integrity look like?
- How might we have the salt of integrity in our fellowship together?
- And, in so doing, *'be at peace with one another'*?