

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 30th September 2018

Mark 9: 38 - 50

If you don't already know, let me tell you now that the Church of Scotland, our church, sits on the very edge of hell, literally. Well, that is the joke told about the Church of Scotland in Jerusalem.

The Church of Scotland has not only a church building and a congregation, but also a Presbytery in Jerusalem. They date back to the British Mandate period following the First World War when Britain occupied Palestine, as it was called at the time.

During the British Mandate the Church of Scotland built the church as a War Memorial to honour the lives lost in Palestine during the World Wars. That church stands on a rocky outcrop just outside the Old City, and from the front door of the church it is a one-minute walk, straight down, in to the valley below, the Valley of Hinnom as it is called in Hebrew. In Greek, which the Gospel of Mark is written in, the Valley of Hinnom is called Gehenna, and in English translation Gehenna is called Hell.

The valley of Hinnom or Gehenna or Hell, in Jesus' day was Jerusalem's rubbish heap. Many centuries before, apostate Israelite kings had moved away from Judaism, and had reintroduced pagan child sacrifice as a religious practice. Those sacrifices took place in the Valley of Hinnom. Later kings reversed that practice, but the prophet Jeremiah declared the Valley of Hinnom cursed. From that time on it was used only as the city's rubbish dump. It was still being used that way in Jesus' day, and as such it was a place that was perpetually alight, perpetually smouldering.

So when you read, as we did this morning, Jesus say that if you cause someone to loose faith then you will go to hell and be devoured by the unquenchable fire, he is not talking about the hell of our childhood imaginations where a devil reigns with a pitchfork. In fact, he is making an oblique reference to apostasy, and he is talking about a real place in Jerusalem that was a smouldering, stinking, cursed and hellish place.

That is why in most translations of the New Testament, although not ours, the verses from Mark's Gospel either make a note in the margin to say that the word hell refers to the place called in Greek Gehenna, or translations retain the word Gehenna in the actual text to make clear that Jesus is talking about a real place, not an imagined one.

Apostasy, which is the crime the Israelite Kings had committed many years before when they reintroduced child sacrifice, and which Jesus is referring to when he warns his disciples against causing others to stumble in the faith, is best understood as a form of disloyalty. And it is disloyalty that Jesus is talking about in this second half of our Gospel reading when he says that it is better for you to cut your hand or

your foot off, or gouge your eye out rather than run the risk of being disloyal or causing someone else to be disloyal to the faith that you or they profess.

It is no surprise to hear Jesus talk about this because disloyalty was a big issue in his day, as it was in Mark's - the Gospel writer - day, and also today. Jesus himself would experience the consequences of disloyalty when Judas later betrayed him, not to mention when his friends abandoned him. His world was one of occupation by a Roman army, a Roman social elite, and Roman politics. The pressures on people to collaborate with Rome and its puppet rulers were endemic throughout society. Collaboration during occupation tears societies, communities, and families apart in horrible ways.

We know that today from histories about occupied countries from the Second World War, but also, for example, if you go to Israel and Palestine today and spend time in Palestinian villages in occupied territories you'll discover how destructive collaboration can be to everyone's lives; how disloyalty to your family, your village community, your nation causes endless suffering.

We might think also of Eastern Europe under communism where in East Germany alone one in every six people are believed to have worked for the secret police; persuaded to be disloyal to their friends and family by informing on them.

In 2011 the actor George Clooney starred in a film, a political thriller, called *The Ides of March*. He played a hopeful Presidential candidate. The late actor Philip Seymour Hoffmann plays his campaign manager. In one scene Hoffmann's character sacks his assistant for betraying the campaign. His speech in the film about loyalty is helpful to anyone seeking to understand why Jesus gave such a fire and brimstone speech himself about the consequences of disloyalty.

Hoffmann's character says to the treacherous employee.

"There's only one thing I value in this world, and that's loyalty. Without it you are *nothing*, and you have no one. And in politics, it is *the only* currency you can count on. That's why I am letting you go."

Without loyalty you are nothing, and you have no one. "As for the man who is a cause of stumbling to one of these little ones who have faith, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone round his neck."¹

In the UK although capital punishment was abolished in 1965, it was still mandatory for the disloyalty of high treason until 1998. Today, a person convicted of high treason is liable to life imprisonment; a whole life tariff may be imposed for the gravest of offences. the state takes disloyalty very seriously.

Few people are ever convicted of high treason, but many - if not all of us - know how it feels in the pit of our stomachs when we have been in some way disloyal, and many - if not all of us - at some time have experienced the consequences of some act of disloyalty.

¹ Mark 9: 42

This warning from Jesus about the consequences of disloyalty within the community of followers that he was forming clearly comes as a consequence of living at a time when disloyalty, collaboration and apostasy were real, live threats. But, this warning against disloyalty was also an issue because in the first part of our reading Jesus, himself, had conversely encouraged his followers to weaken the bonds of loyalty that held them together as a community.

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, particularly in recent weeks, we have read how Jesus confronted those who built barriers between people who were born into their religion or held a special place within it, and those who were not born in to it or who did not hold a special place within it.

We have read of three ways he did this. He welcomed a Gentile in to fellowship with the God; no longer, he said, do you have to be born Jewish to experience a relationship with God. He taught his followers that a good relationship with God and people was not based on the purity of what they ate or how they washed, but on what they thought and on what they said. Thirdly, he declared the greatest to be amongst the last to enter the Kingdom of God, and the least to be amongst the first. There were to be no special privileges in this new order, only a radical equality that could include even children.

In doing these things Jesus broke down the barriers of ethnicity, of religious practice, and of snobbish superiority that debarred people from having a direct relationship with God, a full place within the society they lived, and a dignified fullness to their lives. He systematically broke down the boundaries of group identity, and allowed anyone to enter.

In the first part of our reading this morning he goes even further. This time one of his disciples, John, told him that someone was driving out demons in his name, someone who was not part of Jesus' group of disciples.

The disciples were worried that others were doing what they believed Jesus had called only them to do. In other words they were already starting to create amongst themselves what we might call a professional body, or a guild, or a club, where they were the only ones who were qualified to be disciples, and they would decide who could be a disciple and who could not. For Jesus, that was the sort of social control and monopolisation of power that he was trying to break down in the world around him.

Professional bodies, unions, trades guilds, are an important part of our world today. For example, ministers, like me, in our churches; teachers in our schools; lawyers in our courts; doctors in our surgeries, are all qualified professionals, fortunately. Qualifications ensure that those who make use of doctors, teachers, lawyers, or electricians, plumbers and joiners can be confident that professionals and tradespeople have been trained, that standards are being adhered to, and that learning is being shared.

But, there is a pay off: qualified ministers will preach about what is orthodox in their denomination; qualified teachers will teach, as trained, a curriculum set by

government; justice is administered according to statute; it is a perilous place to be for a qualified medic to offer holistic remedies.

Professional bodies, guilds, unions don't just help to ensure that training, standards, pay and conditions are kept high, they can also stifle innovation, and they can monopolise their trade for members' own interests, wealth and power. There was a time in this country when you couldn't find work in whatever trade or profession you practice unless you joined a Union. Closed Shops of any description can ensure that the industry works best for those who hold power, not for those who need it to work.

When his disciples suggested a closed shop arrangement limited to 12 chosen people, Jesus said to them - about the person out with their group, doing their work - 'Do not stop him ... he who is not against us is on our side...' Then, as if he realised that taken to its extreme this teaching could be as dangerous as it was helpful, could be a licence for any charlatan to enter the market, he talked to them about the importance of loyalty.

The Kingdom of God, the world we aspire to live in, that we as disciples of Jesus are called to build is a place with transparent power; where barriers to entry are kept low; where people are included rather than excluded; where power is distributed amongst many members, not monopolised by a few; where relationships are not mediated by others who have an interest in the nature of those relationships, but built instead directly between people, and directly between people and God.

That is the Kingdom of God, which Jesus is introducing us to. But, if you want to live in this world, in this kingdom, just like any other world, kingdom, country, society, community, family you cannot, ever, be disloyal to its fundamental values, '... no one,' Jesus said, 'who does a work of power in my name will be able the next moment to speak evil of me...'. Without loyalty the foundation of love is undermined, and the structure of any family, community, society, country, kingdom or world crumbles.