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## Jesus' Priorities

James 5:13-20  
Mark 9:38-50

I can easily get distracted from my Christian life, feel my faith slipping, especially when I'm busy planning something. I love thinking about the detail. I pride myself on having good organisational skills. One of my talents!

Recently I heard a preacher say "Jesus loves an awkward moment!". Can you imagine the stunned silence after our gospel reading? Awkward moment! I think the disciples must have been really shocked. As we are! What's Jesus up to here? More of the "radical Jesus" Rev Terry was talking about last week.

How do we make sense of all this talk of millstones around necks, cutting off hands and feet if they cause you to stumble? When God first created the world and human beings "He saw all that He had made, and it was very good".

All that God makes is very good because God is very good. So why would He be telling us to mutilate our bodies if they cause us to stumble? It's strong language. Is Jesus quite deliberately saying "wake-up, keep your attention on me, this is serious business, we are in a battle?"

In recent talks "choice" has been a recurring theme.

The disciples were free to follow Jesus or not (as are we!). Up until now they've been having fun. Observing Jesus, seeing miraculous events where ever they went. Ok Jesus did seem to be regularly in conflict with the religious leaders. But surely his plan was still to raise an army and free the people from Roman tyranny.

I wonder if the disciples were thinking of the battle "outside", in the nation. That's important but maybe even more important to Jesus is, what's going on "inside" us. The battle "within", in our hearts and minds.

It's not surprising the disciples are confused. Are they starting to doubt Jesus? Thinking he's gone a bit crazy. Are there times when we doubt the goodness of God? Just like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when the serpent said "Did God really say...?" Can we hear this same voice in our heads? Questioning "Is God really good, loving and kind? Can we trust Him?"

It can be easy to drift along in our faith particularly when everything is going well but when suffering and troubles hit us, what then?

It seems to be in troubled times, that we realise the need to take our faith more seriously. An illness, a sudden death, a financial crisis, it's bigger than us, we feel helpless, we cry out to God in our need.

In our recent look at the Bread of Life discourse, (John chapter 6) Jesus was asked a question "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

Jesus replies "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

Our “work” is to believe in Jesus. To keep our focus on Jesus. This is not a once and for all thing. Jesus says believing is “work”. He knows this is true from personal experience He regularly needed to retreat from the crowds and hear the voice of His Father confirming His identity and purpose.

We get distracted, we doubt, we need to keep choosing to return to Christ over and over again. Choosing to keep repenting, requires effort, and can sometimes be hard work. Complacency on our part is just what the forces of evil want to weaken our faith.

Perhaps maintaining our belief and focus on Jesus is where our reading from James 5 comes in. Advice and instruction to the Church which can help us personally when we feel our faith slipping. Advice to pray, to get help from trusted others, to pray with them, to share with others, to be prepared to make ourselves vulnerable, being open about our mistakes. To seek forgiveness. And when we are happy, not to ignore God, but to sing songs of praise and thanksgiving.

Jesus desires us to be free. Free to enjoy all the gifts He gives. Not bound by fear, shame and anxiety.

But as it says in Isaiah “His ways are not our ways, His thoughts are not our thoughts” (Isa 55:8). Jesus’s victory, and therefore our victory, was won through the cross. Jesus’s agonising death, his bleeding, broken, mutilated body, followed by the triumph of the new life of resurrection. This victory is permanent, real and can never be taken away from us but evil forces can make a lot of noise trying to tempt us into believing that God isn’t good and can’t be trusted.

So maybe this reading from Mark 9 isn’t about cutting off limbs or plucking out eyes literally. After all hands, feet and eyes are God given gifts and incredibly useful. We need them to serve God. But fundamentally it’s Jesus we need. We cannot do God’s work without relying on Jesus.

So maybe Jesus uses this metaphor to emphasis His priorities. He would rather have us with him in His Kingdom, with a heart for Him, even if we are physically broken. An external attractive appearance doesn’t matter. Jesus’ priority is the condition of our souls, our inner selves. There is nothing more beautiful to Jesus than a surrendered soul.

Is Jesus saying to the disciples and to us, we need to be more self aware? Could millstones around our necks be false beliefs that get us off track?

Could there be parts of our personalities that are drawing us away from Jesus, making us more likely to listen to a lying, evil voice? Maybe our strengths as much as our weaknesses, ( as I shared at the beginning) are what we need to surrender to God rather than a hand or foot? Jesus says “I have come to give you life in all its fullness” but there is an enemy who deceives, accuses and steals.

Lord Jesus, please give us the gift of discernment, that we would see more of your beauty and goodness and hear your loving voice drawing us close. Enable us to keep You the centre of our attention.

Amen