**Sermon: Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost 26th Sept 2021**

**Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9;20-22, Psalm 124, James 5:12-20, Mark 9:38-50**

When I moved to Ayr, a small town, south of Townsville, to complete my secondary schooling from year 10 to 12, I discovered that my first 6 months were spent being teased by a group of Year 10 boys. For the most part, I ignored them. After a while though, I grew weary of the teasing of and chose to do something about it. I went to the office and asked to speak to the Principal about what I had experienced thus far. It was dealt with fairness and a warning. These lads had become for me a stumbling block. I could not relax or be myself.

I remember a time when teaching English as a Second Language. There was on occasion one or two students that proved to be stumbling blocks to cooperation, to myself and to themselves. At least that is how it seemed.

It would be easy to name or to be in a rush to blame people, events, and circumstances that have hindered me, tripped me up or kept me from achieving what I wanted. These I would call ‘stumbling blocks’.

It is also my guess that every one of you could tell stories about the stumbling blocks in your life. Who or what have been stumbling blocks for you? How did it affect you? What caused you to stumble? What happened?

In our Gospel reading today, John and the other disciples run into a stumbling block, an outsider, who as John tells Jesus, ‘Was not following us’ (Mk 9:38). There is no indication by John if this person was directly interfering in the work of the disciples, or even if they opposed them. John just tells us, ‘He was not following us’. John and perhaps the other disciples saw this man as an interloper, not one of them, an outsider. He was clearly to them a stumbling block.

In our society today there will be many people who are not like you or I. The others in society who look and speak differently, dress differently, who think and act differently. And what we discover is that they are not following us. For John and the other disciples, this person posed a threat to them, they may have felt threatened. He was doing the very work that Jesus had given them authority to do, casting out demons, relieving those from oppression, and bringing new life to those around them, in the name of Jesus.

In last week’s Gospel, the disciples were arguing about who should be the greatest. This week they are moaning about this person bringing healing to others in Jesus’ name. This person who has become for the disciples a stumbling block to their status, power and recognition.

Today’s gospel in some ways is similar to last weeks. It is the same story, told over two weeks. Jesus and the disciples are in the same place, the very same house and the child is still there with Jesus and Jesus is teaching the disciples, deepening their understanding and taking the conversation inward. John, however, wants to turn the emphasis of the conversation to the one who was not ‘following them’. This person for whom is a stumbling block to the disciples.

It is a common mistake as humans to do this or at least want to do this with our stumbling blocks. Instead of focussing on what we have to learn from our stumbling blocks, the instinct is often to draw a line in the sand, make it about us and them, and then in some way to stop them. Is this not what we see in our world today, what we have seen on the streets of Melbourne these last few days. However, Jesus wants to focus the attention of the disciples and you and I on us, not on the other and there are two aspects to this. Firstly, that you and I do not become a stumbling blocks to one of the little ones. Jesus is drawing our attention that children are vulnerable, without power, without status. Secondly, if you or I become a stumbling block to ourselves.

Jesus is calling us to look inward, to look at ourselves, to self-reflect. Jesus is asking us not to be concerned about the other, but to look to ourselves, to look within. It would be true to say that biggest stumbling blocks are not those outside of us, but within us. Anger, revenge, judgements we place on ourselves and others, prejudice, a desire to be right, to be first. Unwilling to listen, an assumption we know more, and better. That our way is the right way which can lead to pride, fear, exclusion and a desire for power and control. These can cause us and others to fall.

In what ways have you or I become a stumbling block to ourselves or to others. In what ways has the Church been a stumbling block to Jesus and the life he offers to the world? In what ways have you or I participated in and perpetuated stumbling blocks? None of this is easy, nor comfortable to hear. I don’t particularly like it either, it’s hard work. But it is work about which Jesus is adamant. You can hear it in the images Jesus uses, ‘a millstone hung around the neck and be thrown into the sea’, or to ‘cut off the hand’ or ‘foot’, or ‘eye’ or ‘unquenchable fire’. These are not meant to be literal instructions but metaphors of the seriousness of placing stumbling blocks before others and ourselves.

Our gospel reading is an invitation to you and I to reflect and look inward, to become better, so that the kingdom of God may thrive and grow in each one of us. To deepen our love one for God and for another, to show the love of God to those out in our communities. To pray confidently for one another, and to pray for others to come to know Christ more fully. To remove the stumbling blocks before ourselves and others. The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesian church, ‘I…urge you, to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you were called with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph 4:1-2). Amen.

<https://interruptingthesilence.com/2021/09/19/becoming-our-better-selves-a-sermon-on-mark-930-37/>

Parts of this sermon are attributed to The Rev. Dr Michael K Marsh.