

## Bennochy church: 30th September 2018

One of the things about navigating through the ups and downs of life is we create for ourselves, what are called, coping strategies. If we begin to forget things, we start to write ourselves little notes or strategically place sticky post its. We have all gone up the stairs, got to the top and you have forgotten why we climbed the stairs in the first place. Just me? On returning to the bottom of the stair, you remember why! If you play golf, and you have a tendency to hit the ball off to the right, you end up aiming a bit left to compensate. That's OK, till you hit a hit a shot that goes, straight. We try to think ahead to mitigate against the possibility of what might go wrong.

We are of course all different in our approach to life. If we are planning a journey, for some of you, it is the 'easy oozy' approach, we will get there, no need to plan. For others of you, you have it all worked out in advance. You have thought ahead. You have tried to anticipate any problems that might arise, and for a few, well you have multiple routes, just in case plan A is no longer possible.

This is a difficult passage from Mark's gospel. But I think it has something to do with trying to mitigate how we behave.

Anticipating our future action and putting something in place to prevent us doing, or saying what we know is wrong and will hurt someone else.

I am not sure the imagery in this particular passage would be used today in the numerous 'self help' books that are available. *The Art of happiness, Think and grow rich, The Power of Now* - " is really a spiritual book. If you let it, it can connect you with yourself beyond your name, character, roles or body. You will learn to feel and trust your deeper sense of self again. Most importantly it helps you to be more alive and to centre your consciousness in the present moment." If you have read any of them, let me know what you think.

The writer of Mark's gospel is also taking a spiritual approach. He is quoting the words of Jesus. The language is graphic and to the point. It says, Jesus says. The worst thing that anyone can do is to cause another person to lose their faith in God. No examples are given, but the warning is very clear. And if the context of what Jesus is saying goes back to verse 36, it becomes even more graphic to his listeners.

*"Then he took a child and had him stand in front of them. He put his arms around him and said to them, "Whoever welcomes in my name one of these children, welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me, welcomes not only me but also the one who sent me."* (Mark 9: 36-37)

I can't for a moment imagine that Jesus is thinking about deliberate actions. I think it is more about, the responsibility of our words and actions. To think ahead, or just to think, and to try and mitigate the consequences of what we might say or do.

How many times in life have we come away from a conversation thinking, I wish I had not said that. Word once spoken can never be taken back. Reflecting on what has happened that day, how many time have we said to ourselves, that was an opportunity I missed. I should have done something about that. But we can't go back in time.

In a strange way, this is a 'self help' passage but it contains a worrying image; if your eye causes you to sin, take it out and throw it away. Better to enter the Kingdom with just one eye, than keep both and go to hell. As a little aside, in v44 the phrase 'unquenchable fire' in Greek is *asbestos*, and the image in v48, is of a place called Gehenna which was the eternally smouldering rubbish dump, just outside Jerusalem.

Back to the text. This strong stuff! It reminds me of the phrase, *"in the land of the blind, the one eyed man is king"*. At the end of the day, it is just an image, but it grabs our attention. Let's be clear, Jesus wants us to enter heaven with two eyes! But we can see the point the image is trying to make. As much as is possible, and it is not always possible, put coping mechanisms into place that anticipates where we might harm ourselves or someone else, and remember, Jesus is talking about spiritual health.

Spiritual health is not something we talk about very much, we can find that uncomfortable, yet the spirit or the soul is part of who we are, and the root of faith, is found in the word

salvation. It comes from the Latin word 'salvatio' which simply means, to rescue or protect from harm.

So in trying to mitigate, or anticipate, what we might do wrong to our spiritual health or that of another, these words of Jesus are about salvation. One of the mistakes we often make, is to say that salvation is just about us. Our relationship with God. But that idea would have been foreign to the people of Israel. Their special relationship, their covenant with God, was about the whole people of God.

We must never say or try to live our lives in a vacuum and deny that our actions and words impact the lives of others. It is in this context, that Jesus speaks these words. They don't sound like words of love, but that is what they are. A love strong enough to rescue, protect and save . Amen.