Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost 30 September 2012

That's a tough gospel reading by any measure. Let me read it you again in Eugene Peterson's paraphrased 'Message' version. I invite you to close your eyes and let the words and images bite.

John spoke up, "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn't in our group." Jesus wasn't pleased. "Don't stop him. No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath cut me down. If he's not an enemy, he's an ally. Why, anyone by just giving you a cup of water in my name is on our side. Count on it that God will notice.

On the other hand, if you give one of these simple, childlike believers a hard time, bullying or taking advantage of their simple trust, you'll soon wish you hadn't. You'd be better off dropped in the middle of the lake with a millstone around your neck. If your hand or your foot gets in God's way, chop it off and throw it away. You're better off maimed or lame and alive than the proud owner of two hands and two feet, godless in a furnace of eternal fire. And if your eye distracts you from God, pull it out and throw it away. You're better off one-eyed and alive than exercising your twenty-twenty vision from inside the fire of hell.

Everyone's going through a refining fire sooner or later, but you'll be well-preserved, protected from the eternal flames. Be preservatives yourselves. Preserve the peace."

I wonder what strikes you from the text and which version spoke most clearly to you? I think it's actually quite helpful to read challenging Bible texts in different versions, remembering that none of them can completely accurately translate the original languages or contexts. Add to that the fact that we always hear stories, especially moral or faith-based ones, through our own filters…and we may all have heard very different things in that reading from the gospel we call Mark.

Well I just want to make three points and pose three questions (I'll pause for a while after each Q, which I know is mine and may not be yours….so please let is simply be a prompt to wherever God is taking your attention. Then let's have a chat as we open up the floor, or should I say pews, to your thoughts and questions… So here we go;

1. In response to the disciples' angst at the 'false exorcist' using Jesus name in a kind of spiritual breach of copyright, Jesus makes the comment; *whoever is not against us is for us* (NRSV), or, *if he's not an enemy, he's an ally* (Message). Do you remember what George W Bush said in one of his aggressive speeches in response to the attacks of 9/11? *Anyone who is not for us is against us.* Can you see the subtle but quantum difference? The inclusive, compassionate and dangerously loving Christ-centered response to a possible charlatan giving him and his whole mission a bad name is to see the positive potential. A much more typical human or worldly response it seems to me, time and time again, is to assume the worst, put up barriers and try to protect our things and our pride. And so my 1st question – **what are you trying to protect in your life at the moment, that in your heart of hearts you know needs release, a new freedom, a more generous Christ-centered approach?**

2. My second thought is around stumbling blocks and amputations. Jesus seems to move quickly from inclusion to judgment and even contradiction as he threatens millstones around necks, recommends radical surgery for sinful body parts and promises the fires of hell for anyone who leads others astray or is led away from God's relationship and purposes. It's good old 'fire and brimstone' stuff and it's impossible to comfortably rationalize it away. I draw at least one comfort though – even the most dedicated fundamentalists seem to have two hands, eyes and feet, in the main, meaning that they must be nuancing and contextualizing scripture in some ways. But seriously, I draw even more

comfort from the idea of a saviour who's passions run high, who often speaks in hyperbole to try and get it through my thick skull, and who is not afraid to remind me that life is full of choices for which there are consequences and part of becoming an adult and mature believer is to move beyond 'comfort religion' to the much more satisfying and real world of contradiction, paradox, mystery and deep faith. And so my 2nd question is simply – **what might you or this community of faith need cut away right now, in the spiritual sense? What life-giving amputations might be helpful?**

3. And finally, *everyone will be salted with fire. Don't lose your saltiness, have salt in yourselves. Be at peace with one another* (NRSV), or, *everyone's going through a refining fire sooner or later, but you'll be well-preserved, protected from the eternal flames. Be preservatives yourselves. Preserve the peace.* (Message). Salt of course used to be an incredibly valuable commodity as a preservative, cleansing agent, and seasoning. Gandhi used the salt march to the sea, if you remember, to put pressure on the British colonial government in India, and wars have been fought over the stuff. Salt is still important for us but we're also being told to fear it in large doses in our diets, and it rusts our beachside mansions and big cars. Jesus liked the metaphors of salt, yeast, mustard seeds and pearls to illustrate, among other things, how far a little bit of seasoning, a little bit of faith, a little bit of love and a little bit of hope can go. At a time in history when we bombarded with negative stories of the church and religion in our media, when church attendance is in decline, when we spend far too much time eulogizing the good old days…I think we often forget Jesus' parables about the power of little things. You know, everyone in the Bible fails, in a sense, with regard to their earthly mission. Adam gets kicked out of the garden, Moses never gets to the promised land, David never gets to build the temple, Jonah runs away and then when he does fulfill his mission doesn't get to see Ninevah zapped, Judas betrays, Peter denies, Thomas doubts and Jesus gets nailed to a cross. But the one common denominator for which they all receive their promised reward is ***faithfulness,*** or perhaps in this case ***saltiness***.

I enjoy telling every group I speak to about the 'saltiness' of the young people with whom I interact. In my last jobs at UWA & SGC, I was privileged to select, train and work with dozens and dozens of uni students who willingly gave up their holidays and much of their hard-earned money to offer their time and talents in mentoring programs all over the state with Indigenous, educationally disadvantaged and intellectually disabled young people. In my new roles at CCGS I'm off to Fiji tomorrow with 25 year 7's from St H's and CCGS to work in St Christopher's Anglican orphanage just out of Suva. I'll also be organizing groups right across ours and other schools to work, in their holidays and at their family's own expense, on rubbish dumps in Cambodia, Indigenous health swimming pools around WA, with your 'In Giving We Receive' connections in Nepal, and perhaps places of great need in Bali, India and Ethiopia. It is a great, great privilege and they are amazing.

And so to my 3rd Q; **how *salty* are you feeling this morning and what *seasoning* are you going to do this week in God's name and for the bringing in of God's kingdom?**

Richard Pengelly