

Year B

Mark 9:38-50

“Isn't it strange that princes and kings
And clowns that caper in sawdust rings
And common folk like you and me
Are the builders of eternity.
To each is given a bag of tools,
A shapeless mass and a book of rules;
And each must make, ere time is flown,
A stumbling-block or a stepping-stone.”¹

The Gospel text today is all about the challenge to the followers of Jesus. Will you make stumbling-blocks or stepping stones? What should the church be about? Should it be concerned about keeping the impure out?

¹ Sharpe, R.L. 1937 "Verses I like" New York: Garden City Publishing Company

These questions are somewhat obscured by the extreme imagery that we encounter in the text. Talk of exorcism and hell does not sit easily with a twenty-first century western congregation who have particular, and maybe even acute doubts about all of it. We may wonder why the hell imagery is here in a passage dealing primarily with the boundary markers of the believing community. There is no doubt that Christian beliefs about hell have been sources of division and exclusion throughout the history of the church and most particularly in the modern era. In preparation for today's sermon I re-read

some passages from a book published in 1988 called *Essentials: a liberal-evangelical dialogue*.² It's a most interesting book and consists of a series of chapters on different aspects of theology written by David Edwards, the former Dean of Norwich, who died in April this year, with responses from the well-known Anglican clergyman, John Stott. Edwards expressed his view that a literal concept of hell is not to be read from Scripture and then somewhat surprisingly, Stott tentatively agreed with him, advocating ultimately an annihilation of the wicked.

² Edwards, David L & Stott, John 1988 *Essentials: a liberal-evangelical dialogue* London: Hodder and Stoughton

This caused all sorts of rumbles in the evangelical church community who had viewed John Stott as their David, skilfully and heroically taking on the liberal Goliath. Some then decided that John Stott should be excluded from the number of the faithful, much like the disciples who did not look favourably on the outsiders casting out demons in Jesus' name. In recent times around other controversial issues, evangelicals have continued to police the boundaries of acceptable belief and the likes of former Bishop Tom Wright and Steve Chalke have been branded heretics by some.

In 1985 the actress, Cher starred in a movie called *Mask*. She played the biker mother of Rocky, a teenager with a severe facial deformity. Possessed of a gentle nature, Rocky volunteers to help out at a camp for blind kids. If they can't see his face they'll judge him on who he is, not what he looks like.

During the camp he develops a romance with one of the blind teenage girls. Blind since birth, she doesn't know what Rocky means when he talks about colours or clouds. Rocky is determined to communicate these things to her, and has a brilliant idea on how

to do it. He leads his girlfriend into the kitchen and over to the refrigerator. He takes out a rock he has placed in there earlier and places it in her hands. "That's blue" says Rocky. He then takes her to the oven and pulls out a rock which has been heated. Placing it in her hands she comments on how hot it is. "That's red" says Rocky. He then pulls out a bunch of cotton wool balls and places them in her hands. "That's what clouds are like". The two of them grow excited as this young blind girl feels, that for the first time, she understands what colour and clouds are.

Of course she never sees colours and clouds as they really are. Rather, by comparing them to something she already knows she is able to gain a sense of what they're like.

When it comes to describing realities beyond our direct observation the Bible writers often adopt a strategy similar to Rocky's. How could we possibly understand exactly what heaven or hell will be like if we've never experienced that kind of reality yet. So pictures are drawn in terms of what we already know as familiar: a brilliant city, a beautiful garden. In painting such pictures we may not get a literal understanding but

like Rocky's blind girlfriend, we get a sense, and the sense of it is all we need. How sad therefore that we might move to exclude someone on the basis of how they see what they can only feel.

How do we decide who is in and who is out? Do Spanish Inquisition like tendencies shape us? Well, the answer in the Gospel passage today is get rid of them if they do. In fact, get out of the way and do not prohibit anyone from coming to me, said Jesus. The little phrase "to place a stumbling block" translates the Greek verb *skandalisein*, from which the English word *scandalise* comes.

You are the scandal if you do anything to knowingly harm a follower of Christ. And then Jesus used scandalous language to describe what should happen to those parts of the body which cause hindrance. In other words be incredibly firm with those who are part of you in the body of Christ who get in the way of the welcome that should extend to others. All of this should have a major impact on the way the Church is perceived by the outsider. The word on the street should be that that's the place to go to find friendship and support. And is it? Is that

the perception? If we're not seen to be like that then where will the people go?

The movie *The Elephant Man* told the true story of John Merrick. Merrick was born in the slums of England in 1862, and from birth experienced massive rejection due to his grotesque appearance. Merrick suffered abnormalities that resulted in a large and severely misshapen head, loose, rough skin, and twisted arms and legs.

His mother loved him dearly, but died when he was ten. His new step-mother didn't take to him, and at twelve, he was expected to work to contribute to the family finances.

After two years working in a cigar shop he was dismissed because his deformities meant he could not keep up the required pace. After this “failure” Merrick’s father began beating him. Merrick wound up on the street and was rescued by a kindly uncle, the only person who would help him out. Not wishing to further burden his uncle Merrick left to live in a squalid workhouse for drunks, cripples and the mentally ill. His life there was so miserable that he offered himself to a carnival owner as a sideshow act.

Merrick was a hit. People would pay money to line up and observe him like some animal in a zoo. But the carnival finally provided him with security and a place he belonged. It was while the sideshow was in London that Merrick met Dr Frederick Treves. Disgusted by Merrick's treatment Treves wanted to help. He gave Merrick his card, but lost track of him. The police started clamping down on the sideshows, so Merrick was sent to Belgium to work in a sideshow there. But when Belgian police also clamped down Merrick was forced to make his way back to England. As he limped down Liverpool Street

station, foul smelling and misshapen, a crowd gathered simply to watch him.

The police took him aside to sort things out, but Merrick's speech was so slurred by his deformities that they couldn't understand him. It was at this point Merrick showed them Dr Treves' card. The police sent someone to get him, and Treves rushed back. He took Merrick back to London hospital and began a newspaper appeal for funds to help Merrick. The response was very warm, and soon sufficient that Merrick was able to have his own house on the hospital

grounds with permission to live there permanently.

Treves' care marked a real turning point for Merrick. At first Merrick would act like a frightened child and hide when anyone came into his room, but over time he began to engage some in conversation. Dr Treves discovered that Merrick was in fact highly intelligent and sought to nurture his growth. In the coming years more and more people, would meet him and show him kindness. He began meeting Countesses and Duchesses. He even had many visits and letters from the Princess of Wales, forming a friendship with

her. Throughout this time Dr Treves reports Merrick changed dramatically. He began to develop some self-confidence, to spend time traveling in the country, to discuss poetry with another new friend, Sir Walter Steel.

Merrick's story shows us the power of love and acceptance. Rejected all his life, treated as a "thing", it was the loving welcome of others that liberated him to become all he could be. His life was made tragic not by his deformities but by the response people made to them.

It is our response to the stranger that will make the difference. It will define us and

reveal to the world just how close we are to
the teachings of our founder, Jesus Christ.

May we be found to be faithful. Amen.