

**Mark 9:38** John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” <sup>39</sup> But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. <sup>40</sup> Whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup> For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

**Mark 9:42** “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. <sup>43</sup> If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. <sup>45</sup> And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. <sup>47</sup> And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, <sup>48</sup> where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

**Mark 9:49** “For everyone will be salted with fire. <sup>50</sup> Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

## Sermon:

In this morning's text we hear John the disciple say to Jesus

"We saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he was not following us"

Or, to place emphasis in a different way:

**WE** saw someone casting out demons  
in **YOUR** name  
and **WE** tried to stop him  
because **HE**  
was not following **US**.

Why didn't John say:

"We tried to stop him because he was not following you"

or:

"We asked him if he was following you"

or:

"We admired what he did"

or:

"We're jealous and insecure"

or

"We saw someone casting out demons in your name. Do you know him?"  
or any number of things.

Why is it that they tried to stop him? And, importantly, what is it that happens when we begin to think that just because we are following Jesus that we are therefore the guards of the borders of God.

So, here we have a little script of group dynamics - and fairly limited group dynamics. It's the story of the schoolyard, it's the story of politics, it's the story of the business, congregation, family, workplace - Us and You and We and Them.

The little word, the little four letter word “stop” is also worth paying attention to. They try to stop the man.

Jesus only uses the word “stop” twice in the gospel of Mark. He says “Don’t stop this man” and he also says, when people are bringing children to him “don’t stop them”.

For Jesus, there is an intrinsic relationship between what is said and what is done. To be sure, we would all like this to be the case, but Jesus, rather than starting with what people say and taking from that what they should do, starts with the opposite. He reads first of all by what people do, and then deduces from this what they are saying.

Jesus says “whoever is not against us is for us”

So often we change this, however, and say something like “Whoever we don’t know is against us until they prove otherwise”. We have a lens of suspicion.

I was at a youth festival when I was younger. It was a Christian youth festival and at it they had debates — this was the 1990s so the debates were about whether you should listen to secular music or not, whether playing Led Zeppelin backwards was an adulation of the devil, and there were also debates about Who Is A Christian, and its complicated underbelly - Who Is Not.

There were three men from the Freemasons who came to speak about their own group. They were in a big tent full of thousands of young people, young enthusiastic Christians, and they were speaking about how understood Freemasonry to be compatible with Christianity. The mood in the tent was entirely hostile. This was a debate, and so naturally there was a counter-team - three men who didn’t believe that the Freemasons could be Christians.

I don’t know much about Freemasonry. I didn’t then and I don’t know. I turned to my friend next to me and said “Whose side are we on?” and he pointed, not to the Freemasons, but to the others, and said “Theirs”.

I said fine, and I joined in the booing.

In the name of God, in the name of the truth we thought needed protecting, in the name of a love that we were distorting and in the name of an expression of protection that was dependent on annihilating the dignity of these brave men who had to face down three thousand young people ready to explode with the dynamite of God.

To look back to today's text from Mark 9, we see the reframing interests of Jesus. The text speaks about about demons and exorcisms and the supernatural and the large scale demonstrations of power. The Greek word for power is *dunamis* from which we get "dynamite" and "Dynamic" in English.... things that enliven and things that blow up.

But Jesus' first point of view is to assume friendship rather than enmity or rivalry. Jesus seemed to be alert to the love of friendship, and he seemed to be a man hungry for the connections of friendship. Earlier in Mark's gospel, some friends have carried a friend to Jesus, and when they couldn't get to him, they take the roof off the house and lower the friend down. Jesus forgives the man's sins, heals him, but honours the love of the friends for the miracle.

Seamus Heaney captures this in his poem "Miracle"

Not the one who takes up his bed and walks  
But the ones who have known him all along  
And carry him in –

Their shoulders numb, the ache and stoop deeplocked  
In their backs, the stretcher handles  
Slippery with sweat. And no let up

Until he's strapped on tight, made tiltable  
and raised to the tiled roof, then lowered for healing.  
Be mindful of them as they stand and wait

For the burn of the paid out ropes to cool,  
Their slight lightheadedness and incredulity  
To pass, those who had known him all along.

Returning to the text of today, the second thing I notice in Jesus' response to the disciples is how, when engaging with them after they have tried to stop doing some deeds of power, he moves in metaphor from these grandiose expressions of supernatural power to something entirely more ordinary.

Giving a cup of water to someone.

Have you ever had anyone who wanted a cup of water? What is it like when someone is desperately thirsty?

I used to live a community very similar to this in Dublin - about 40 young people living in a big house, attached to a parish. People going to daily mass would pass by our house on their way.

There was a woman called Mary who used to pass by every day. She would often knock on the door and ask for a cup of water. She'd had a difficult life. She lived about 200 yards to the right of our house and the church was about 100 yards to the left of our house.

She didn't need the cup of water, but she liked the chat. She liked being able to ask for something and get it, she liked the company and that we all knew her name. Once I answered the door and she said to me "Can I have a birdie?" I didn't know what she meant, and when I asked her what she meant, she puckered up her lips. She wanted a kiss. I was 19 and she was close to 90.

I kissed her, and I still remember the touch of her papery skin.

The writer of the gospel of Mark moves us from this small interaction about who is on the inside group and who isn't into a series of statements from Jesus about being willing to put up with all kinds of calamity.

He begins by saying that if you cause someone else to stumble then woe is on you. And then he speaks about causing your own self to stumble, and he speaks about pains of the neck and hands and feet and eyes.

It seems that he's referring to the troubles that the Jewish people underwent in the centuries previous, when the Jewish people were being forced by kings to eat unclean meat or do other things that were uncustomary to them. When they refused they had pains of the eyes, feet, neck and hands inflicted upon them. Their tongues were rendered useless.

In a sense, the writer of the text is saying "We know what it's like to have an enemy, and we know the kind of courage it takes to withstand an enemy. Don't make enemies where there aren't any."

With the way of the Gospel, we are always called to hospitality.

And hospitality must be reciprocal. It's easy to say "Come into my house and here are my traditions and when you know how things are in my home, you will be welcome"

Sometimes that's necessary.

Other times though, hospitality needs to come from the powerless. The disciples were feeling powerless when they saw somebody performing deeds that they couldn't do, so they rushed to overly associate with Jesus, and then say "we stopped him". It was, in a sense, a failure of hospitality because of an addiction to fear. And when we are frightened we put up borders, because a border is a limitation and we are frightened of a love that knows no fear. So even god needs some guards and we become those guards.

Jesus response is to begin with an assumption that we aren't enemies, and to move from items of great power to items of great hospitality. Somebody is asking you for water. Give it to them. It is for them, but it is for you too.