

## Mark 9.38-50

<sup>38</sup>John said to Jesus, '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 afterwards 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.

<sup>42</sup>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.

<sup>49</sup>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.'

Address at the Friday Communion Alresford St John September 24<sup>th</sup> 2021

Some of you may have seen the Sage Concert Hall in Gateshead, or even St Mary's Church standing next to the Tyne Bridge as you watched the Great North Run. In the late 60s I served my curacy at that church and the area where the Sage now is was, then, scrap yards – but in more ancient times it was salt pans. Salt was not just a condiment in the ancient world. In an age when refrigeration was unknown salt was widely used to preserve food. It is from those days that we get the word "salary", and sayings like "he is worth his salt".

In this morning's passage from Mark there are three sections, not necessarily connected by Jesus, but put together by Mark as a teaching session by Jesus.

In Mark's Gospel the war with evil and the devil is ever present: much of Jesus' healing is about exorcism and the casting out of evil spirits. In that war, Jesus is telling his disciples, we have to remain focussed.

Firstly, if anyone is not against us, then they are for us. In a world where people belong to one nation or another, the usual tendency is to believe that if people are not for you they are against you. But this is God's creation, and all people are his creation. Unless we have very good reason to believe to the contrary, we all need each other, we belong to each other. We can only overcome Covid or Climate change by all the peoples of the earth working together. Jesus' saying underlines this.

Secondly, you need to make a priority of what is really important. In war we often have to make difficult decisions – to sacrifice one life for the many, to abandon a community to its fate, or to ask someone to risk everything in a dangerous mission. We must not do anything that causes our sharing of the Gospel to be damaged in any way. Jesus puts this in forceful language, but the message is clear.

Soon war will come to Jerusalem and within a generation of Jesus' death Jerusalem with its great temple will be burnt to the ground by the Romans. Then everyone will know reality and many who have ignored what God has been saying through Jesus and the prophets will realise how wrong they have been – they will be salted with fire. Either you are salt or you are not salt. There is no such thing as refurbished salt, 2<sup>nd</sup> hand salt or Old Age salt!

So, thirdly, the salt we have is our experience of God, our meeting with Jesus or our inspiration by the Holy Spirit. If we value that salt we shall enjoy peace among ourselves. But if we let slip that salt there is nothing that can re-constitute it. Our fellowship with the living God, like salt, lies

behind everything in daily life. It preserves the important things in our lives, it sharpens the senses. We must not let our love for God grow cold. We are deluded if we think that the war against evil is a thing of the past.