## Sermon

The first part of the Mark passage, and I’ll read it again because we had this reading first, is maybe something that teaches us more about Jesus than how we should act ourselves.

*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.” 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. Whoever is not against us is for us. 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.*

Was it a copyright issue, a demarcation issue that the disciples were jealously guarding that meant that John brought up the issue of someone casting out demons in Jesus’ name but they weren’t his disciples. I wouldn’t have been surprised if Jesus had said that the power to do this was his and was also given to his disciples and therefore being upset at someone else doing this good deed of casting out demons. Maybe this account is added to Mark’s gospel as this was a tension in the early church. Maybe it’s a tension in the church of today. How can good deeds be done in God’s name by other religions or cults that we might otherwise condemn. Can things be done that please God but others that deny Him?

But what His reaction shows about Jesus is something that we might find hard to relate to at first as exorcism is beyond the everyday experience of most of us.

Jesus is not an egotist obsessed with protecting his reputation, but someone who cares about people. It does not matter if the love comes from his hand or the hand of another, as long as it comes. There are many people, using the name of Jesus or not, with whom we can join hands in the concern to set people free from what oppresses them: inside religions, outside them, everywhere.

The next bit of the passage commences with that stark warning about not harming the faith of the vulnerable. *“Any person who causes one of these little ones who trust me to stumble, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he was thrown into the sea”*

I don’t think we can understand this passage without an understanding of hyperbole. – deliberate exaggeration to make a point. Jesus was Semitic and his listeners were Semitic. They weren’t Romans or Greeks using language carefully and guardedly. Their story-telling tradition used hyperbole. The story must not be seen through our Western, moderate, careful language traditions. For us, the more important a subject is, the more guarded and careful our wording and expression is. Not so in the Middle Eastern, Semitic discussion.

I’ve seen a millstone. It’s held in the hand and grinds grain into flour. Aboriginal people would grind grain using a hand-held round stone as well. But by Jesus’ time it was much more on an industrial scale with a stone weighing many tons and needing an ox or two to turn it. Some were turned in a vertical position like this one and some lay on top of another millstone and the grain was added to the middle of the turning stone.

Here’s one found in modern day Turkey. Of course, a lot of these have survived millennia as they have a lot of inertia and some are still being used. But back to the passage. Why would you need a millstone to sink someone in the sea? It’s hyperbole. You would only need a small stone to make sure you drowned. Jesus was deliberately exaggerating to make the point even more scary.

It was more frightening when you consider that the sea was something that the Hebrew people in first century Palestine were very much frightened of. Few could swim and I read somewhere that at that time they saw the sea as an alien place, belonging to primitive powers of chaos from which God had established the land. For them in that era, to be drowned was to be lost for all eternity. There was no hope of resurrection for those who were lost at sea. Consider some of the most frightening stories of the bible and you will get what I mean. Paul’s shipwreck and near sinking, Jonah in the storm, the disciples with Jesus in the storm. All involve the scary sea.

But who were these ***little ones*** that Jesus doesn’t want to have caused to stumble? It could relate to the passage that comes immediately before this that we did not read today.

After the disciple had brought their argument that they were having in the background to Jesus about who was to be the greatest and in V 36 the Mark passage says

36He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, 37"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

We could take the passage to refer to literal “children’ or it could go back to the be the new converts, children in the faith. Children were and are among the most vulnerable in societies. Vulnerability comes about because of a power imbalance. These power imbalances can come about not only because of being young but by societal rejection of some because of their sexuality, race, legal position in marriage and many more. Old people are vulnerable, the infirm, poverty causes vulnerability.

Hearers of the day in Jesus’ time would be familiar with the exploitation of children, especially the poor. It just reminded me of a modern day story told to us by a Nepalese charity worker. In a drought many farming families will become desperate. This charity arrived to assist a remote agricultural village. When they met the people and offered help they cried. There were no young children. A few days before they had sold them to keep them alive.
Here is Jesus using hyperbole again. Would it be helpful to cut off your hands or feet or poke out your eyes if you were tempted to make a child ‘stumble’, maybe a euphemism for take advantage of the vulnerable? The point Jesus is making is that it is your problem. Don’t do it. Notice that - The onus is not on someone else to stop you, you control your own behaviour. Other people don’t do the amputation or poking out, you do it yourself. It’s your responsibility not by others coercing or fear of externally administered punishment.

The mention of going to Hell (albeit half-blind, limping and otherwise disabled). Could that be hyperbole too? This is the same God who is caring God isn’t wanting to send people there but to have them distain from sinning, in this case not caring for the vulnerable, or to repent of their sins.

Mark ends with the image of salt. It is not so much that salt ceases to be salt but that it becomes contaminated by additions over time, dirt, stones, etc, so that it becomes useless. He links salt with peace. In the context salt is an image of integrity and wholeness. Being at peace with one another is about wholeness in community – not about hushing things up. Wholeness is also about living in such a way that you don’t have to lose limbs.

In the James passage it ends with

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Bringing back a sinner from wandering is the opposite process to what Jesus was talking about when he was talking about “causing them to stumble”.

Whose sins are covered and what does that actually mean? Exploring that further.

1st letter of Peter 4:8 says, “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”
Proverbs 10:12 says, “Hatred stirs up conflict, but [love covers over all wrongs](https://www.gotquestions.org/love-covers-all-wrongs.html).” In what way does love cover sin?

To “cover” sin is to forgive it, and forgiveness is associated with love. The best example of a love that covers sin is Jesus’ sacrificial death on our behalf. Jesus’ prayer from the cross, “Father, forgive them,” says it all (Luke 23:34). Jesus’ bearing of our iniquities was an undeniable act of love ([Romans 5:8](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rom%205.8); [1 John 4:10](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20John%204.10)). In fact, Jesus did more than just cover our sin; He did away with it completely ([Hebrews 10:12–14](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Heb%2010.12%E2%80%9314)). That’s covering a multitude of sins.