

## St Edmundsbury Cathedral

25 September 2021: Trinity 17

Numbers 11.4-6, 10-16, 24-29; James 5.13-20; Mark 9.38-50

### Cutting it off? A physical response to spiritual pain.

May I speak and may we hear in the name of the one who loves us, who redeems us and who sustains us.  
Amen.

A physical response to an emotional pain.

The Young Minds website advises that “self-harm (sometimes referred to as self-injury) most often occurs during times of anger, distress, fear, worry, depression or low self-esteem in order to manage or control negative feelings. *It can* also be used as a form of self-punishment for something someone has done, thinks they have done, are told by someone else they have done, or that they have allowed to be done to themselves.” Cutting, burning or pinching... abusing drugs or alcohol... living with an eating disorder... it's not the 'what' is happening... but the 'why' that is significant.

Why do I open my sermon today with these words? Because a large chunk of our Gospel reading today includes the metaphor of physical consequences to emotional and spiritual pain: the cutting of limbs... the gouging of eyes.

Statistically there are people hearing this sermon who live with the reality of self-harm. Data published by Mental Health First Aid England in January 2020 tells us that almost one in five students aged 12-17 report self-harming at some point in their life: this is pre-covid data. 20% of people... and that's before you add to that number friends, family and professionals whose lives are touched by self-harm or the impact of the last 18 months. 10% of all calls to Samaritans telephone helpline are about self-harm.

If that is you, know that you are precious in the sight of God. Know that you are called to live in love and peace with God and with yourself. Know that arriving at that point will take time and support. And that there is, there will be someone you can speak to about it. When you are ready. The electronic copy of this sermon will be uploaded to the Cathedral website and in it there are weblinks to refer to if you want to find out more.

I said it's not the 'what', but the 'why' that is significant when thinking about self-harm. And it's the 'why' of Jesus' words in today's gospel that we think about now... why does Jesus speak these words: after all, if we were to take these words literally the majority of us here would be sitting in the pews, a ramshackle bunch of limping, half-blind self-mutilated individuals looking as though we were characters from Margaret Atwood's book, *The Handmaid's Tale*. You might argue metaphorically that's just what we are.

Retired Episcopalian priest, Barbara Brown Taylor says the one thing that she likes about *this passage* 'is that it defines the limits of literalism. Walk into the most Bible-believing church you can find... and I bet you won't see many people with eye patches and wrapped stumps, because even the most literal Christians balk at this passage... they become biblical critics just like the rest of us; which does not mean that we criticize the Bible but that we ask important questions of it.'<sup>1</sup>

This Cathedral community is a long way from scripturally fundamentalist: I find that we are more a 'thinking, reasoning community', reimagining ancient traditions as from week to week we critically and prayerfully receive

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<sup>1</sup> Pg 120 'Bread of Angels', Chapter 'Shock Therapy', Barbara Brown Taylor

and ask questions of God's word for our lives today: how very *Via Media*, how very Anglican... echoes of 16<sup>th</sup> century priest and theologian Richard Hooker's often cited and well-worn three-legged stool that is: scripture, tradition and reason.

So as we ask questions of these texts, of ourselves and of God this morning, we notice that Jesus is travelling south from his homeland. He is cutting himself off from his earthly home. From his physical base he's turning his face to embark on and to prioritise a spiritual journey; to make his way to Jerusalem for the final time, to the place where death awaits him.

Four times in the Gospel reading he implores 'it would be better for you...', impressing on us the importance of his message... as he makes this journey. Why? As he willingly cuts himself off from his earthly home, Jesus is calling us to attend to our spiritual reality with an urgency and a language that shocks us to the core of our physical being. This text is meant to shock. To be so shocking as to not be taken literally, but shocking enough to be taken seriously.

Shocking enough to remind us that we have a soul that is just as precious as our body and mind. That we have not only a physical home, but a spiritual home too. If our souls are not well, then our two good legs and 20:20 vision will not take us anywhere worth going. In this world, or the next.

The physicality of what we do matters, it really matters, and what we say counts. Because there are not only physical consequences, but spiritual consequences too, not only for us, but for those around us as well. These things matter because we are seen by others and we too often create or become the physical stumbling blocks to others' spiritual journey to God.

How can our souls be well if we blame our tongues for saying mean things? Or we blame our hands for taking something that isn't ours? Or our feet for leading us into situations we should not be in? Too often, instead of taking responsibility, we seek to apportion blame.

How can our souls be well when we single out and judge others?

- He was working in your name but not following us! We tried to stop him. Said the disciples.
- Similarly in our reading from the Hebrew scriptures this morning we hear '*Stop them Moses! Stop them!*', from Joshua, son of Nun when 2 of the 70 'insiders' were found prophesying in the camp outside the tent of meeting.

As though God being at work in the world is worked out by those who profess the 'right approach' with the 'right beliefs', at the 'right time in the 'right place'. Neither Jesus or Moses had any inclination to stop God's action in the world, so why do we presume to become the gatekeepers of orthodoxy. Deciding who's in and who's out? Looking back and complaining and moaning and weeping that things aren't what they used to be? Too often we look only inwards, to ourselves, to our church community, neglecting the outwards, our community and those about us; and the upwards – our spiritual life with God.

Inwards – outwards – upwards : now there's a three-legged foundation on which to build our lives.

For we are both physical and spiritual beings, created in God's image to love one another. This morning we are both implored and invited to attend well to both physical and spiritual realities as we gather around the table to physically receive the spiritual food that sustains our souls and our bodies to be a living sacrifice: that we might be sent out in the power of the spirit to live and work to God's praise and glory. Amen.

Revd Sarah Geileskey, Cathedral Curate

For advice, support and information about self-harm you may find some of these resources helpful.

If you are a young person struggling to cope text YM to 85258 for free, 24/7 support

Call Samaritans free on 116 123

<https://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/about-mental-illness/learn-more-about-symptoms/self-harm/>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/self-harm/about-self-harm/>

<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/young-person/blog/five-things-you-can-do-if-someone-tells-you-they-are-self-harming/>

<https://selfharm.co.uk>

<https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/if-youre-having-difficult-time/if-you-want-self-harm/>