

## HYPERBOLE AND JESUS' NAME

Our reading today is a real stouter!  
There are two parts to the reading and they are both startling and confusing!

We've got the puzzling part where Jesus says,  
*"Whoever is not against us is for us."*  
(Mark 8:40)

And that's followed up by Jesus saying outrageous stuff like,  
*"If your eye makes you lose your faith, take it out! Better for you to enter the kingdom of God with only one eye than to keep both eyes and be thrown into hell!"*  
(Mark 8:47)

What is going on with Jesus here?  
What's going on - full stop!  
When I first looked at this section of Mark it seemed like the two parts to the reading were unconnected.

I reckon what's happening in these passages is that Jesus is saying something about judgement.

### HOW WE JUDGE OTHERS AND HOW WE JUDGE OURSELVES

*"Whoever is not against us is for us."*  
(Mark 8:40)

Who on earth was this other man that the disciples are concerned about that was doing work in Jesus' name?

We have no idea. There are no details.

But it's maybe good that this happened because it gives Jesus a chance to teach something important.

That children's story (The Sneetches) that we heard earlier, illustrates something that is basic to human behaviour.

We like to feel important and special and one way to do that is to consider other groups of people *less* worthy or *less* important and *less* special.

This is true of all humans and it certainly doesn't bypass Christians.

We spend a lot of our time worrying about other churches.  
Think of the things people say.....

That church is too busy for my liking.

This church is too quiet. That church is not friendly.

These guys are far too liberal. They are just a bunch of raving fundies.

This lot are obsessed with condemning homosexuals.

This lot have turned away from the Word of God.

That church down the road believes different things to us.

The church round the corner don't let women take part in the worship

And on it goes.

Sometimes the differences are slight - difference in style or worship or organisation.

Sometimes we might argue that the differences are more substantial. We may have a fundamental difference in belief.

But Jesus is telling us something here.

We don't need to all be the same (and we don't need to always agree about everything all the time) but we've to cut out the judging and the "writing off" of others and accept that when we follow him we are on the same side.

Despite the differences we may have what unites us is greater.

Which brings me to this phrase "In Jesus name."

This man that the disciples were complaining about was doing things "*in Jesus name.*"

Jesus' name is not a magical chant. The word itself is not like a spell.

Sometimes a prayer will end with the word "*Amen*".

Other prayers might end "*In Jesus' name, Amen.*"

Are they the better, more powerful ones?

What "*in my name*" means is not literally speaking Jesus name out loud.

As if just saying that word is some kind of magical mantra.

**In my name** means to be lined up with - to be alongside.

It means we are in agreement with, working for the same causes, singing off the same hymn sheet.

Jesus is affirming that when we (or anyone) work for good, we work for him.

Its a reminder that Christians everywhere are on the same team and should learn to accept one another.

But I think it's even wider than that. It's wider than just Christians.

Lets bring in some expert help here - a world-renowned theologian - someone we can learn a lot from: Father Jack Hackett from Father Ted.

Maybe you remember the episode when the Bishops come to visit the priests on Craggy Island.

Now Father Jack is a liability. He almost never speaks and when he does its usually an obscenity.

So the other priests have to spend time coaching him in time for this visit.

He's to say only two things.

One is the word "*Yes*", if he's asked a question.

But if he isn't asked a question that can be answered with Yes he has to say....

*"That would be an Ecumenical matter"*

For many people watching the show, this expression might not mean much.

It is some kind of technical church-speak. The joke still works even without knowing the meaning of the phrase.

Now when we use the word 'ecumenical' in a church setting we usually mean all the churches acting together.

But the Greek root of the word is even broader than that. The word literally means 'the whole inhabited world.'

What Jesus is saying is that when anyone does what is right, and shares his concern for doing good, they are on his side. God honours the good actions, the compassionate actions of all people, no matter what faith (if any) they have.

When we do what is right – when we do what is good – God will honour that.

So - what if we spent more time on trying to do good and less time arguing over who is right – or who is in or out - or acceptable?

Actions that are good, that are kind, that are in line with what Jesus was about - are all acceptable to God.

Stop judging other people and writing them off– Jesus is saying here.

And then we come to the second part to the reading. Jesus basically continues with... but if you must judge then here's what to do...

Look at yourself.  
Never mind other people. Be a judge of yourself!

And we come to these shocking statements.

*"If your eye makes you lose your faith, pull it out! Better for you to enter the kingdom of God with only one eye than to keep both eyes and be thrown into hell! There the worms that eat them never die and the fire that burns them is never put out."*

(Mark 8:47)

There a word for sentences like this - hyperbole – we use this all the time. Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration in order to make a point.

For example.

He's got a ton of money.  
She's as skinny as a toothpick.  
He's got a million things to do.  
If I can't buy that new game I'll die.

Sometimes an exaggeration can seem quite violent.

Think of our everyday expression *"Cut it out!"*  
 We use it all the time – but think about what that really means!

We are not exhorting the use of violence when we say it.  
 We are not expecting someone to attack themselves with a knife.  
 All we mean is – stop doing that.  
 Stop talking at the back of the class.  
 Stop annoying your wee sister.  
 Stop teasing me about my new jacket....

Then there's the examples I always use, about being in a car with noisy kids in the back...

*"If you kids don't settle down we'll stop the car right here and you can walk!"*  
*"If you kids don't settle down we'll tie you onto the roof-rack!"*

If that's exaggeration and hyperbole that's fine.  
 If you are literally serious you need to be locked up!

Jewish societies have always been fond of this kind of exaggerated 'over the top' speaking.

Jesus is speaking in those terms here.  
 If we don't understand this (and we want to take Jesus seriously) we could be in trouble.

A priest called Dennis Linn was asked to make a visit to a hospital so see someone he knew called Bill. Bill had led a pretty crazy and drama filled life already but when Dennis arrived at the ward he saw that his hands were chained to the bed, and a bandage covered his right eye. He had tried to gouge out his eye that morning. When Dennis asked why, Bill quoted the words of Jesus.

Dennis was Bill's closest friend. Through mental institutions and various jails and prisons Dennis had visited Bill more than anyone else.  
 Dennis knew that despite the fact that Bill never seemed to make the changes he needed to make and get his life together, that he would never say to Bill – well that's it – you've had your chance – to Hell with you.

And if Dennis wouldn't give up on Bill, would God?

And then Dennis thought about the verse.  
 Everyone knew Bill was crazy to take the first part of the expression literally but what about the second part...

If Jesus didn't literally mean that we should cut off our eyes our ears or hands, did he literally mean the bit about the fires of hell and the burning and the worms?

Is the God who loves us so much, the God who **is** love, literally preparing some place to torture us with worms, fire and unending pain?

If we can love some people unconditionally, can God not manage that?  
Is our love bigger and stronger than Gods?  
Just to ask the question we realise the answer.

I love the story told of the Free Church sermon.  
The minister was preaching on and on about Hell, warning his congregation about the disaster that would await them there.  
He had worked himself into a fury.  
This had been going on for 30 minutes now and one old man up the back was getting tired of it.  
The minister shouted at them all, *"There will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth."*  
The old man shouted up to the pulpit, *"What if I haven't got teeth?"*  
With blazing eyes the minister pointed straight at him. *"Teeth will be provided!"*

Jesus is not looking for one-footed, one-handed, half blind disciples. He is not seriously suggesting we start self-harming.  
The language is metaphorical.  
After all, feet, hands and eyes don't cause sin. Sin has its roots in our greed and ambition and selfishness. It comes from our attitudes. Feet, hands and eyes may perform sinful actions but they are followers not leaders.

One of the problems about saying something is a metaphor is that it gives us a chance to ignore it. Ah it's *just* a metaphor – it's *only* a metaphor.  
But Jesus didn't say this for us to ignore it.  
So what is he trying to say?

I think he is telling us to be ruthless on anything that keeps tripping us up and causing us problems, or making us fall into sin, or anything that keeps us from being the people we should be.  
And I think he is making the point that sometimes this may mean giving up things that are not bad in themselves. Isn't that the point of his metaphor - there is nothing inherently evil about feet or hands, but if they are causing a problem, get rid of them. What otherwise good things can cause us to fall into sin? There is no one answer - that's the point - it is different things for different people.

Alcohol is perfectly fine for many people in moderation but for some it's a real problem area and it needs to be stopped altogether.  
There are some potential dangers lurking on social media and the internet, but even perfectly innocent internet surfing or social media can become a problem, as it eats into our time in an extraordinary way and prevents us from doing other things.  
Shopping is not bad in itself, but for some it can become addictive and we begin to value material wealth and stuff to the detriment of more important qualities.

We all have different issues to face.

And Jesus is saying...

If something we are doing is hurting us or other people, then cut it out!

If something we are doing is taking us away from God then cut it out!

If something we are doing is stopping us from living to the full or being who we truly want to be, then cut it out!

So this is what Jesus is trying to get through to us in these two parts of our reading...

Spend less time wondering about who is in and who is out and more time in just getting on with doing good.

Be slow to judge and condemn others and write them off.

But be quick and radical to judge yourself!

And

If something you are doing is hurting you or others, or taking you from God, then stop it.

In the end the message turns out to be simple enough – but something that we all need to hear.

Mark 9:38-50

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(See Matthew, Sheila, Dennis Linn: Understanding Difficult Scriptures in a Healing Way, 2001 p10-11)

(See Nathan Nettelton: Chopping it Off (Laughing Bird) October 1 2000)