

Sunday 30th September 2018

Proper 21 – Year B

James 5:13-20 & Mark 9:38-50

The great lengths people go to so that their name is not used without their permission.

There is a shop close to where we used to live in Birmingham in an area called Kings Heath that has a rather cheeky name.

“We sell fridges and other appliances”

(Picture at 10am)

Many international companies are extremely protective of their names, how they are used and what they are associated with. People can be like that too, though some celebrities seem to let their names become associated with all kinds of products made with their name on it. Evil Knieval museum has all kinds of things from breakfast cereal to crash helmets!

Jesus seems less worried about how his name is being used, well at least when good things are being done with it. Someone who is not with the group of Jesus' closest friends is using his name to cast out demons and the disciples don't like it and they have tried to stop him. Jesus tells them not to worry and says,

“Whoever is not against us is for us”. Listen to that again, “Whoever is not against us is for us”.

That is not quite how the phrase gets used today, what we hear people saying these days,

“Whoever is not for us is against us”. Saying things that way round draws the circle pretty tightly, it says that those, and only those, who do things in just the way I say they should be done and I think they should be done, they and only they, are the only ones who are for us. “Whoever is not for us is against us.” Just like the businesses who keep a tight hold on their name and how it's used.

The way Jesus says it, “Whoever is not against us is for us” loosens up the circle and says if the work is being done because of Jesus, then there will be those who do it or say it in ways that are different to me, yet if it's not against what Jesus is all about, then it's for him”.

Perhaps what Jesus is trying to show his friends is that in his name things will be done that surprise them, and just because they haven't got control, and they haven't seen Jesus direct things first hand then don't necessarily think it can't be his work. His work is bigger and more surprising than they will ever be able to imagine or control. They may even be wasting their energy and effort trying to control what is done in his name.

The letter of James shows us where we should be focusing our attention. Not complaints but prayer. As James closes his letter with three questions,

Is any one of you in trouble?

Is anyone happy?

Is any one of you sick?

I guess that covers all of us at pretty well any times, troubled, happy or sick! If the answer to any one of those is yes then the response is the same. PRAY

PRAYER is something for us all, it is not complicated and doesn't require years of training, it doesn't require the right words said in the right way or read from the right book. It is simply coming before God and opening our hearts. Troubled, happy or sick, we tell God how we feel, what is going on in our lives. We can certainly do that alone, and we can do it with others. PRAYER can be very general, but it can also be very specific, and indeed James gives a specific example, "if any of you are sick, seek out the church leaders who will pray with you and anoint you with oil." I always have oil for that very purpose in my pocket, it something practical and purposeful, actually very beautiful and powerful, to take a little oil make the sign of the cross on someone's forehead and pray for their healing. Its not complicated and elaborate, doesn't need any fancy words, it brings a need to God in prayer. For Christians prayer is the response to whatever comes along, suffering or celebrating the same response is required PRAYER. James was very careful to say that PRAYER is for everyone, not just those we perceive to be super saints, he tells us that Elisha was a human being like us. Here is a great opportunity to remind you that St. Andrew's has a prayer gathering tomorrow at 8pm in the church lounge.

We are at a moment in our church life together when we need prayer. I know that most people we greatly shocked last week when I announced that our churchwardens had both resigned. And that shock has carried on through the week, the best response to our shock is prayer. Prayer that takes us right back to our reading from Mark's gospel. After saying "Whoever is not against us is for us." Jesus moves on to talk about stumbling blocks. The things that get in our way and can trip us up. The things that stop us praying and drive us away from doing things for Jesus.

At this moment here in the life of St. Andrew's we have the potential to stumble collectively and individually. We can let the news that our churchwardens have left trip us up and get in the way of "Knowing Jesus, Glorifying Jesus and making Jesus known to others."

The Greek work that Mark writes and we translate "to stumble". The Greek word is "skandalisei". When he writes that we need to avoid stumbling the word is "skandalon". I hope you see the connection. There is nothing like a scandal to get in the way of God's work and trip us up. We are at a time in our lives together, as followers of Jesus, to make our choice. Will we be tripped up by the "scandal" or will we respond as James instructs and turn to prayer. Amen.