

## Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Numbers 11:25-29

Ps 18

James 5:1-6

Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

We've just heard Jesus go from talking about service and acting in his name to counselling us to cut off our hands and feet if they stand in the way between us and eternal life. To cite a silly movie, his disciples could have been excused for thinking, "Boy, that escalated quickly!" We read this nowadays and we all say "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ", when what we probably *feel* like saying is "What was *that* all about, Lord Jesus Christ?"

Many scholars will point out that Jesus was employing a common rhetorical tool used by Rabbis at the time – that is, using graphic overstatements to drive home a point in a memorable way. And while this is indeed true, I think we need to be careful not to dismiss Jesus' words too quickly.

Let me put this in context by way of a story. It's a true story, and it was turned into a very dramatic movie just a few years ago. In 2003, an American outdoorsman named Aron Ralston suffered a freak accident while he was hiking through a canyon in the wilds of southern Utah. As he was climbing down a narrow stretch of the canyon, a large boulder became dislodged, fell, and crushed Aron's right hand against the canyon wall.

Aron had rather foolishly neglected to tell anyone of his hiking plans, so he knew that no-one would be looking for him for a while, and that they wouldn't know *where* to look once they did. For the next five days, Aron slowly consumed the small amount of food and water he had left, whilst trying everything he could think of to extricate his arm.

On the sixth morning, after nothing else had worked, and close to death, Aron had an epiphany. He used the torque against his trapped arm to break the major bones in his forearm. He then tied a makeshift tourniquet, and using a dull two-inch knife, proceeded to cut off his arm. It took him about an hour to finish the amputation. On the long hike back to his vehicle, he was fortunate to encounter a family on vacation, who were able to call for help, ensuring that he got to a hospital before he bled to death.

The movie's called "127 Hours" if you're interested (that's how long he was trapped). It's very good, although you might not want to watch it after a big meal! When Aron recounted the incident a while later on a late-night talk show, the normally light-hearted host said to him with great seriousness: "You know something about life that I don't." *You know something about life that I don't.*

In the Gospel, Jesus spoke with remarkable bluntness about the *seriousness* with which we should seek our salvation, recommending extreme measures if we find ourselves in mortal danger. I would suggest that we should not be too blasé about this language.

Aron Ralston found himself in mortal danger, because his arm was pinned under that rock. He judged—quite rightly—that something drastic had to be done to save his life. Does it ever occur to us that we could be in a similar situation, spiritually? In mortal danger, even? That we are spiritually pinned under a rock, and that if we don't do something drastic we could die?

Don't get me wrong – I'm not urging people to cut off their hand or foot, or to pluck out their eye. What I *am* saying is that we perhaps should not be so quick to dismiss Jesus' strong words as mere rhetorical flourish.

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In the years prior to the Second Vatican Council—as the older folks here may recall—it was not uncommon for many Catholics to have a kind of “hellfire insurance” approach to the faith. In other words, the driving force behind the religious belief and practice of many Catholics was the desire to avoid the fires of hell. As an aside, I should note that this was more true in some places than in others – and that many Mediterranean countries, for instance, generally did not have the same degree of fixation on this sort of thing.

But in the years following the Council, there's been an understandable reaction against this kind of “hellfire insurance” faith. Topics such as hell, evil, and sin, have been discussed far less frequently than in the past, and on the whole that's probably a good thing.

However, you could argue that one side-effect of this shift in emphasis has been a widespread loss of *urgency* in the spiritual life. We can often think of it all as being a rather light-hearted affair. God is love, God's my friend, therefore whatever I do I'll be forgiven – it doesn't really matter.

And it's true, we *will* be forgiven if we sincerely seek it – but God in his goodness has given us free will, and we aren't saved automatically, against our will. God *is* love... but love cannot be forced. We have to accept the invitation – and if our “yes” is to mean anything, then “no” must be a real possibility. This, ultimately, is what lies behind the teaching on hell – that we are free to reject God's offer of love if we so choose.

Jesus' point in today's Gospel is essentially this – *take your salvation seriously*. If you are straying from God's love, seize opportunities to be reconciled with God, and to turn your life around. Do not be afraid, and do not become scrupulous – but do not become complacent about sin either.

If we are grasping at worldly things—money, pleasure, sex, power, worldly honour—instead of seeking our fulfilment in the Lord, we need to *cut that out* of our life. If we are walking down paths that lead us away from God, instead of towards him, we need to *cut that out*. If we are looking for fulfilment in all the wrong places—entranced and beguiled by the things of this world, instead of preparing ourselves to look upon God face-to-face—we need to *pluck that out*.

This is really hard stuff. It is not uncommon for us to head down these dead-end paths for a long time – and I don't need to tell you how hard it can be to change direction after having trodden down well-worn paths for many years.

But if the stakes are Eternal Life, then there really should be no debate. We need to let ourselves be moved by the power of Jesus' language. As he is essentially asking us – are we willing to eliminate certain things from our lives—our self-centred obsessions and distractions—if they are compromising our friendship with God?

Do not be afraid. In his Resurrection, Christ has conquered death, and opened the door for us to Eternal Life. The question is, what are we willing to let go of—what are we willing to *sacrifice*—in order to accept this invitation?