

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Numbers 11:25-29

Psalm 18

James 5:1-6

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

Well, there Jesus goes again.

Really, he's a masterful teacher. Some of his teaching perhaps doesn't strike us as powerfully as it did his initial audience, perhaps because we no longer live in close contact with the agricultural imagery that he used in so many of his parables, or because we've heard his parables and other teaching so many times over the years.

But even now, two-thousand years later, so much of his teaching still packs a real punch, shaking us up and demanding our attention. Consider the dramatic imagery he uses towards the end of our Gospel passage—cutting off body parts ... the fire of eternal separation from God—it's very powerful stuff that figuratively slaps us in the face and forces us to reckon with it, whether we want to or not.

Of course, many scholars will point out that Jesus was employing a common rhetorical tool used by Rabbis at the time – namely, using graphic overstatements to drive home a point in a memorable way. And while this is indeed true, I think we would do our Lord a disservice if we attempted to drain his striking imagery of its clarifying power.

I mean, it really is a disturbing image – cutting off a hand or foot, or plucking out an eye in order to enter into life. Compare it with the idea of martyrdom, which, objectively, is more extreme. You and I might not have any desire to win a martyr's crown (as some saints have over the years), but most of us would at least acknowledge the power and indeed the beauty of the witness to Christ offered by the many martyrs throughout our Church's history. Indeed, we probably even find the very idea of martyrdom more palatable than what Jesus is suggesting in this Gospel passage... which is a bit strange if you think about it. I mean, the martyrs in every age don't just give a hand or an eye, they give their whole life. And yet the idea of martyrdom somehow makes more sense to us than what Jesus is suggesting here.

Maybe it's the voluntary nature of it. The martyrs give their life for Christ, but on the whole they don't seek out martyrdom – it's thrust upon them by circumstances. Yet the idea of a voluntary—and seemingly non-necessary—amputation seems more shocking.

We're certainly familiar with the concept of necessary amputation in order to save life. For instance, there is a brave young teenager in the parish whom I baptised a few weeks ago, who has had aggressive cancer and recently had to have a leg amputated. He's known to many of our parish youth leaders, who have done a wonderful job of

supporting him and helping him not get bogged down in self-pity. Indeed, he and his family could do with your prayers.

So that kind of amputation makes sense. In contrast, maybe you heard about Matthew Dawson, the Australian hockey player who cut off part of a finger in order to compete at the recent Paris Olympics. He had suffered a nasty finger injury during a training match shortly before the Olympics, and if he had undergone surgery to repair the finger it would not have healed in time for him to compete at the Paris games. So instead, he had surgery to remove the finger at the knuckle and was able to play.

This incident received a lot of coverage, again due to the shocking nature of it. Life-saving amputation we understand – amputation just to play hockey at the Olympics seems a little more questionable.

So perhaps our reaction to Jesus' imagery reveals something to us about how seriously we actually take the life of the spirit. Most of us who are regular church-goers would probably say that we consider the spiritual world to be just as real and important as the material world, if not more so. But if we balk at Jesus' imagery, it might reveal that—when push comes to shove—we are actually materialists. In other words, it might reveal that we consider the physical world—including our physical health—to be what really matters. Amputation to save our physical health makes sense, but amputation to save our spiritual health seems crazy.

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So how about it? Is there anything in our life that we might need to amputate—to “cut out”—in order for us to enter into the fulness of life that we have been made for? If so, it's probably not a physical body part.

Is there something in our life that we hold onto, which, left unchecked, could threaten our very life with God? Are there times when, instead of relying upon God, we turn to something else – something that promises to make us feel better, perhaps, but which never does, and instead only causes pain, both to ourselves and to others?

Removing something like this from your life may at first feel like the equivalent of losing a part of yourself, particularly if it's something that you've turned to for many years, such that it feels like second nature. It might be something external, such as alcohol, porn, over-eating, gambling, stealing, stinginess, cheating, violence, infidelity, lying, abusive language, etc. Alongside such harmful external behaviours are often accompanying internal issues, such as patterns of self-hatred, abusive thoughts, fear of rejection, lack of forgiveness, holding onto hurts, jealousy, vanity, anger, fear, etc.

If you recognise any of these symptoms, it may well be that you have something you need to amputate, so to speak, from your life. And part of that is recognising that

behind such harmful actions and thoughts are a series of lies. Lies such as, “this will make you feel better”, or “you deserve this”, or “this isn’t really that bad”.

Examined in the light of day, we can see that such actions and thoughts do not actually help us, and they do not provide any fulfilment of the deepest longings in our soul. So “amputating” such things from our life is not so much a case of losing something, as it is removing an obstacle in the way of our freedom. We need to renounce the lie that such things will help us, or give us comfort.

Breaking free from such things is a little bit like when someone needs to break out of a toxic relationship. It takes courage, because for all its harmfulness, it is familiar, and a lot of the time we think we don’t deserve anything better.

For the fact is that, underneath all the harmful behaviours and thought patterns we tend to engage in, and all the little lies we accept to justify them, is often a great big lie. A life-altering lie that has unknowingly shaped much of our life and that we constantly scramble to work around. A lie such as, “I am unlovable”.

This is the great lie that Christ came to expose and dispel once and for all.

Through our baptism, you and I have been united to Christ, such that what is his is now ours as well. What the Father said to him at his baptism, the Father now says to you: “You are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter, whom I love. With you I am well pleased.”

Our heavenly Father knew you before you did anything good, or anything bad. And he loves you now just as he loved you then – with a love beyond our capacity to comprehend or repay. So don’t believe the lie that you are unlovable, or that you are unworthy of the Lord’s blessing, or that you need your assorted sins in order to feel happy.

Instead of turning to your various crutches in times of stress or difficulty, learn to turn to the Lord. Receive his love, find your deepest identity as a beloved son, a beloved daughter, created in love, redeemed out of love, and cherished beyond all telling. Ask the Lord to help you *want* to be free – free from the lies that bind you, free to live in Christ.

The good news is that what we might need to cut out of our lives isn’t as drastic as losing a limb – because, unlike a limb, what we’re being asked to cut out is not actually good for us at all. Removing our attachment to sin can feel drastic, hence the drastic imagery used by Christ. Indeed, it may at first feel like a quasi-death – but like the quasi-death of baptism, it will lead us to new life, because it will help clear the way for Christ in our life.

Our Lord says, “Don’t look back – for I have great plans for you.”

The path to freedom requires that we change harmful behaviour patterns, acknowledge our vulnerability to sin and our dependence upon God, and deepen our relationship with the Lord every day through prayer, study and service. It's important that we have supportive and healthy Christian friendships in which we are free to acknowledge our weaknesses and be affirmed in who we are. And as we resist the lies and grow in the knowledge of our true identity and destiny, we will grow in our confidence of the Father's unchanging love.

As St Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, "Be confident in this, that he who began the good work in you will bring it to fulfilment until the day of Christ Jesus." (Phil 1:6).

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your son Jesus and showing us the way home to you. Our lives are hidden in Christ. In him, may we receive every spiritual blessing we have for us. Thank You, Father, for knitting us together in our mother's womb, for calling us by name, and for having a special plan for our lives. Your works are wonderful indeed! May we rest in your love, safe from all attacks of the enemy, and free from all lies. May we live in the glorious freedom your son won for us on the cross, and share that freedom with others. In his holy name we pray. Amen.