

# Stumbling Blocks or Stepping Stones

a sermon preached on the

## 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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### St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lection: Mark 9: 38-50

Today's Gospel makes a number of important and practical points; and though these were addressed to the leaders of the community at that time, they have relevance for us all as disciples of Christ.

The apostles came upon a man who was not a member of their community, who was healing in the name of Jesus. They tried to stop him. Why? - because they were jealous of their special relationship with Jesus. In their minds no one had a right to do these things outside their community.

There are many such exclusive religious communities of this mindset existing today. I was brought up in one such sect myself. They were an exclusive body and accused all other religious denominations of missing out on essentials of godliness. However, Jesus said "Do not stop him". The fact he was acting in His name meant that the man was not against Jesus. Therefore Jesus was giving his followers a lesson of openness and tolerance.

Some people (like the disciples) are threatened by the gifts and achievements of others. If only they had a more open attitude, they would find themselves enriched, rather than diminished by others' gifts. God bestows his gifts freely. Our responsibility is to welcome them whenever they appear, and use them to the glory of God.

As in last week's Gospel, Jesus says that "anyone who gave the little ones a cup of water would be rewarded". The cup of water is a symbol of a kind deed. A small act of kindness can turn sadness into joy for some people.

Then Jesus deals with those who are a stumbling block to others.

Today we live closer to one another than ever before. Therefore the influence we have on each other is greater. Whether we are aware of it or not, we can be stumbling blocks in the path of other people. We are stumbling blocks if we are unkind or unjust in the way we treat people. We are stumbling blocks when we fail to understand their weaknesses and mistakes and write them off as a result of this. We are stumbling blocks when we humiliate those who don't live up to our expectations or make them feel inferior. We are stumbling blocks when we exclude people and treat them as outsiders.

But we can also be a stepping stone to people when we help them to believe in themselves, and boost their self confidence; when we help them to recognise the gifts and talents that God has given them. No one is excluded from the grace and love of God. I feel it is our duty as Christians to meet people where "they are at" on life's journey and walk it with them.

There is a deep desire in all of us to be truly ourselves, but to do that means to stop relying on something outside of us for our happiness. The more we try to face life without this crutch or that, the more confident we will become.

It takes courage to strip ourselves of unnecessary needs; things and people we have become dependent upon. We grow into our true selves, not by adding more, but by letting go of much we have accumulated in the course of our lives – the fears, anger, envy, jealousy, status, power, etc. To be free we need to be sprung from these traps, and strange as it seems, we are so often afraid to be free. We find it difficult to face our naked selves, so we put in all kind of support systems to hold us to believe in our true worth. The road to freedom begins when we become aware of our suffering and negative feelings and allow them to come to the surface.

There are beautiful places within us, which never come into view, until suffering alerts us to their presence. We have the choice of allowing our negative experiences to become our stumbling block or use them as stepping stones, bringing home to us the energy of our true potential.

A few weeks past, I was forced into making a critical decision. A decision which would affect the future. I was fortunate enough to be on retreat, which gave me the space I needed, and as I sat in the sunshine in the Community Garden, I thought about the present moment as a sacrament.

So many people are trapped in the past, held captive in the future, and therefore unaware of the here and now, to be attentive, to connect with what is happening. Moving into the present is like entering into your own garden for the first time.

With this awareness I was able to make my decision and put my trust in the unconditional love of God.

I am sure I heard them whispering in heaven – “I think the stubborn old fool has got it at last!”

References: F. McCarthy  
D. O’Leary

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