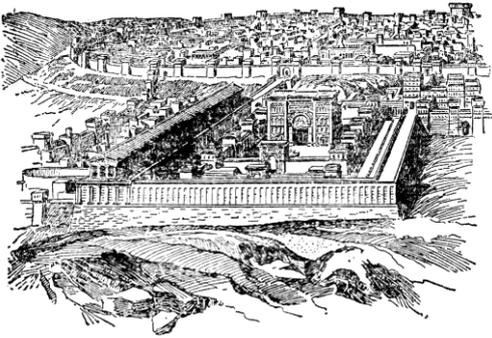


## HOMILY FOR 26<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME



Every so often we get a gospel that is not a story or parable but a set of sayings that the writer has put together. In today's collection we have one of the hardest of those to understand. Cutting off hands and plucking out eyes. What is Jesus up to here?

It is all to do with holiness. Who is holy?

So let's start with the Temple, which was the holiest of places for Jews, where God was most present to his people. It was a massive building for the time with high walls. Even today just the remaining base is high enough and the Temple rose up on top of that. When people travelled to it for the three major pilgrimages of the year from the different parts of Israel or further afield they were amazed by its grandeur. Compared to their villages and homes it really spoke to them of the power of God.

But the Temple was a complicated place. At the heart of it was the Holy of Holies where only the High Priest could enter. Then there was a series of courtyards through which you passed, and how far you could go depended on your state of holiness.

Now holiness was a practical thing. If you were a woman you could only go as far as the Courtyard of the Women. If you were disabled you could not enter that, so for example in the Acts of the Apostles the disciples find the lame beggar lying at the entrance to that courtyard, called the Beautiful Gate. Because he was disabled in some way he or his family must have sinned. So he is excluded. Further out we have the Court of the Gentiles beyond which only Jews could enter. Here were the stalls of the merchants changing money and selling animals for sacrifice.

Towns were the same. The disabled were kept at the gates, so as in Jericho, Jesus meets the Blind Beggar as he comes to the gate of the town.

It was a strict system of purity. What and who was holier.

As you can see it has little to do with the interior spirituality of the person. What is in their heart.

So today, in a typically challenging fashion, Jesus is having a real go at this system.

At the heart of what he is saying is, “What is really important for reaching God?” Is it the externals or is it something much more? No, surely it is what is in your heart, what is within.

So when he talks of maiming your body in any way, he deliberately and provocatively chooses actions that would automatically exclude people from being close to God under this system. Being disabled in some way... to have no hand meant you had sinned. (A bit like some of the punishments we see in parts of the world today.) What he is not doing is suggesting you actually do this.

What he is saying to them is, ‘If there is something in your life, in your heart, something that you are doing, that is pulling you away from God, then get rid of it.’ In his terms ‘pluck it out of your life.’ And it is better to appear outwardly sinful to others who are only judging on exteriors, than to distance yourself from God who looks at the heart.

Jesus is doing two things. On one side he is teaching people what is really important in the spiritual life and then also blowing a hole through their whole way of judging who is holy. Jesus is knocking down those barriers that have been erected, partly by the religious establishment, that prevent people from seeing that, whoever they are, they can reach out to God. It is a question here of ‘access’ to God, and Jesus is saying, the very reason I sit with sinners is to show them and you that barriers have to come down. ‘I am the way, I am your access to God.’

For us today he is repeating that message. Don’t let any other people’s judgement based on a purely human system of assessment ever persuade you are not good enough to meet God, whatever has happened. It is God who judges, as the Bible says, not humans.

And there is a practical application to this as well, which touches today’s theme of refugees and migrants. It is that of our temptation to build barriers. One of the great scandals of Europe today is the camps sited on the barbed-wired, or sea-protected, borders of various nations, with people living in appalling conditions, especially as winter approaches. Perhaps the most pertinent phrase for this is the gospel’s reference to a cup of water. As we said last week, each of us belongs to Christ, and to give anyone help in his name means we will not lose our reward. As Bishop McAleenan quoted recently, ‘We do not help people because they are Catholics, but because we are.’