

*Stumbling Blocks*

Mark 9:38-end



I recently heard of the case of a mother with a young baby who approached her parish church to enquire about baptism for the child. The church was welcoming, but insisted on the mother's attendance at the *Alpha* course they would be running, so that she would have a good grounding in the Christian faith before bringing the child to baptism. The woman was disappointed – her husband worked away from home all through the week, and she had two other young children – there was no way she would be able to attend regular weekday evening group meetings, no matter how much she wanted to, and so, no way to getting the baby baptised. I am sure the church, with a genuine commitment to bringing more people to know Jesus, would be horrified at the thought, but I think they were, by their insistence on course attendance, constituting a stumbling block, not only to the mother, but to the baby and to all her family.



In today's gospel reading, Jesus is quite clear how serious a thing it is to be a stumbling block to faith; not only to the person whose faith never gets chance to develop, but even more to the person who caused them to stumble. The person who had faith themselves, but somehow used that as a way to keep others out, and, in doing so shewed that their own faith was, in truth, not really faith in Jesus, but in some other construct of their own making.



Are there other stumbling blocks to faith? Are our churches genuinely welcoming, or cold? Are they aloof, or rooted in their communities? Do we go out of our way, collectively and individually to seek out those in need, to minister to them in the way that we know Jesus would have done?



Do we as Christians, attract or scare by the way we conduct our lives? Speaking for myself, I know that sometimes I do put myself out to look out for others, but I know that I don't do it all of the time, nor even much of the time.



Towards the end of last year the Church of England published a book, and quite a lot of other material, under the title, *Living in Love & Faith – Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage*. Some of you may have read the two articles in the Parish Magazines I have written on the subject. It had been the intention that this material should be used throughout the Church of England this year to consider the matters raised, with a view to some decision making in 2022 about whether the Church should adjust its stance on these issues. The plague has disrupted this programme for discussion, but the Diocese of Derby is intending to work on the subject through this autumn. The Vicar and I are hoping to attend a virtual taster session on the subject early in October, with a view to seeing how our parishes might contribute to the discussion before the year's end. Although it has not been my experience, I have, over the years, talked with many gay and some trans people who have felt excluded from the Church of England by its teaching on matters relating to sexuality and by its attitude towards them as individuals. To them the national church has become the principal stumbling block to faith. There are other people, though I have less personal experience of them, who would find any alteration to the church's teaching in this area a serious stumbling block too. How we are to reconcile these two beliefs remains to be seen!



In the gospel reading Jesus uses hyperbole to make his point strongly. I don't suppose he really expected people to go and amputate their own limbs or pluck out their own eyes, much less to commit suicide by drowning, or that anyone would be condemned for ever through one heedless act or remark, but I do think that he wanted to make us see that putting things in the way of others to stop them coming to him was a very serious matter – and that to do so with intent, and consistently would be a gross failure of love towards the other. For this must be at the heart of our relationships, if we are truly to follow Jesus, that our actions and attitudes are formed in love for the other person.