

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22  
Psalm 124  
James 5:13-20  
Mark 9:38-50

## Sing for Joy

There doesn't seem at first glance to be too much to sing about in today's scriptures, what with hanging and stumbling blocks and millstones. So I want to start looking for the good news in what Jesus says about the "little ones". *"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea."*

"Little ones" refer to young ones, children, and also those young in terms of faith, new believers. In the traditions of the Church, confirmation is the official moment in which we are supposed to say "I believe" for ourselves. Usually, Confirmation takes place around the time of puberty and becoming a young adult – say 8 or 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Indeed, the teachings during confirmation are intended to guide young persons towards the moment when they can kneel before the Bishop and be strengthened in their spiritual journey. And for some, it may be an unequivocal moment of "I believe."

My experience however in preparing dozens of young people for Confirmation brings me to a different place. Our youngsters may indeed be able to make some informed statement about what they believe after their study, but often they will honestly tell me they are questioning their belief. They will tell me it is difficult to accept some of the sayings in the Creed. For me, these are the right questions to be asking, and they allow me to ask them to seek for ways in which they "see" the work of God in the world. I ask them to prepare a PowerPoint presentation or a photo-montage and they are wonderful. Sometimes they depict nature, the beauty of a butterfly for example; sometimes they are about the homeless, or the soup kitchen. My experience has been that our youth relate best to practical manifestations of God's work in the world; here they can perceive a difference being made in his name. For my own daughter, the soup kitchen is as much an embodiment of her faith as coming to Church. The idea that confirmation is some kind of graduation is a false one and I think it provides a stumbling block to our youth. They get confirmed and are done. That's the last we will see of some. It is a journey I explain to them, and what you are committing to is a willingness to continue in that journey as it unfolds, living by the way we have learned that's in our backpack. Drawing on things we find sustains us in community; reaching out to help those in need or trouble. We don't have all the answers and some things we take on faith, allowing ourselves an opening to the unexplained... which is faith.

Today's Gospel is about our spiritual journey. The precise moment in which we come to faith is unique and individual. It takes time to develop faith and I think there is a point for us all when it is very tender, when it is but just a flicker of a flame, a tender little shoot, when we teeter on the brink of accepting our faith for ourselves.

I invite you to take a moment in silence right now, to think back to when you could really, genuinely say "I believe."

I am guessing that for many of you it will have been after a testing event or time in your lives, or a time of great joy. And this is where, I think, we can connect with this gospel message today. My own story was that I attended a Roman Catholic Convent. As a non-Catholic, I could not receive Communion. I so wanted to. So I asked my mother could we go to our own church so I could receive because I believed. My parents were not regular church-goers, so my mum told me to ask my grandmother if she knew anyone who could take me. I did and granny said she would ask her friend Mrs. Taylor if she would take me. Every Sunday Mrs. Taylor called for me, and then again on Thursdays for Confirmation classes. She was the one to remove a stumbling block for me. Many years later when I was ordained, I went back to see her. She was by now in her nineties and she had no idea what an influence she had been in my young spiritual journey towards belief.

Mostly we come to faith, real faith when we are being tested or salted with fire. We need some mistakes under our belt, those stumbling blocks that Jesus is talking about. That's why I would prefer to confirm people when they are 44. Then they do truly know a bit more about their faith. Truth is we have to grow into our faith – just as we have to grow into our lives. And making mistakes is a part of it. I heard this story some years ago: “There was a man who enjoyed his Sunday morning routine. Getting up, putting on his sweats, making his coffee and going outside to collect his morning paper for a good read. One morning, he went outside to discover the paper had not been delivered. He looked around in case it had gone into the bushes, but no, it wasn't to be found. However, his neighbor's was there, lying on the blacktop of the driveway. He looked around and the lights weren't on, so he thought to himself, “Maybe I'll just go and get that paper.” Then he realized what was happening. He stopped, turned on his heel and went back to his house, and cancelled his subscription. He realized that his routine had become an attachment that almost led him to stumble. We too have many things that lead us to stumble. Consider excessive use of email, the downloading of “free” music to iPods, the occasions we may lead someone else into gossip, or when we get caught up in a boastful lie. We all do it. None of us is perfect, otherwise why would there be so much about forgiveness?

The good news is that when we confess, when we name what we have done, we are forgiven. The stumbling blocks will happen, how we deal with them is part of the maturing of our faith. But if we make those mistakes and don't learn from them or change the way we are, then we were better to cut off the hand, or the eye or the foot! When we begin to believe, we are hooked. Just as Jesus illustrates with the man curing demons: “*Do not stop him*” Jesus says, “*for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.*” We can't ‘un-know’ what we know. That's where all the prayers, commandments, the stories provide the foundation. And the gift is that we have opportunities for being salted and tempered by fire throughout our lives.

Right now St. Barnabas is in the midst of it. But you know what? It's normal. Where we are right now is right where we should be. Listen to James: “*Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord*”. This is the stuff of being in a community of Christians – right here in this parish. People will get sick, maybe even die, babies will be born, people will fall in and out of love and all will need ministering to. A parish member, who has been unable to be here much, came to see me the other day, worried that she couldn't do a lot to actively help in the transition. Oh yes you can, I assured her – you can pray, pray for us, pray for all the clergy who may be

ready to answer a new call. And so can we all. And when things are good, we are told we should praise. Well, I don't get too many of you contacting me on a good day. Mostly I see the bad days!

Let's not look at this time as a stumbling block. Let's take it as an opportunity to grow in faith and become stronger. The Church is not a building, it is the people, it is all of you, wherever you are on your journey, "little ones." What James is about today is being in community and what it means to hold faith together – no matter where we are in our spiritual journey as individuals. We are at one and the same time in a journey with Christ personally and with Christ in community. That is why we join together in all situations to pray together, to sing together, and to praise God from the bottom of our hearts. We have much to be thankful for, much about which to sing for joy. +

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