

- So, this morning, we have part of the story of Esther and a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples.
- And both of these texts offer us some pretty gruesome imagery:
- Harmon, the villain of the piece in the book of Esther is hanged on the gallows that he himself had prepared for Mordecai, Esther's cousin.
- And then Jesus is talking about chopping of limbs and plucking out eyes.

- But, actually, there is some stuff here that it is good to notice and good to hear.

- And the first thing I want to notice is what Mordecai does at the end of our reading.
- He sends letters to all the Jews who were both near and far, and encourages them to mark two particular days as a holiday and to celebrate those days as "as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies... and that those days should be days of feasting and gladness".

- And I want to say that we are celebrating our own days of feasting and gladness right now, and that we have every reason to celebrate!
- Today, and every Sunday, is a day of feasting and gladness because we are celebrating the good news of our salvation,
 - the good news of the liberating work of God for us and among us,
 - the story of deeds of power done in Jesus' name.
- This is what we do every Sunday and that is a good thing!

- And, actually, it is that which brings me to all the amputation of limbs and plucking out of eyes that Jesus is talking about.
- Except, of course, Jesus is not actually talking about cutting off arms and legs and plucking out eyes.
- Jesus has a pretty robust turn of phrase and a vivid way of making a point to encourage his listeners to attend to what he is saying.
- And what he is saying in the midst of all that fire and brimstone are some words about ministry,
 - about our calling as Christians.
- So I want to pay particular attention to Jesus' response to John.
- John says to Jesus,
 - "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."
- And Jesus replies,

- "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me."
- I want to suggest that we are all called to do deeds of power in Jesus' name and that what we are celebrating here today, what we are doing right here and right now are deeds of power done in Jesus' name.
- When we gather together in worship in this place,
 - when we pray together, with and for one another and for the needs of the world,
 - when we share the peace with one another,
 - when we kneel or stand shoulder to shoulder with one another around the communion table and share together in the sacramental mystery of the life of Christ...
 - when we participate in the life and mission of this parish,
 - when we offer companionship and fellowship to folk at the Selwyn Centre,
 - when we offer support and resources as companions to people experiencing grief and loss,
 - when we provide food parcels to people who are having a hard time making ends meet...
 - ...so we are participating in deeds of power done in Jesus name.
- Because the purpose of those deeds is freedom and service.
- The purpose of those deeds is to bring relief to God's creation.
- When John says to Jesus,
 - "we saw someone else casting out demons in your name",
 - and Jesus says,
 - "that's awesome!",
- what Jesus is responding to is that act of freedom done in his name,
 - that act of liberation.
- That unknown, unnamed exorcist who cast out demons in Jesus' name was participating in God's work of liberation which is to free us from the things that possess us and the things that oppress us.
- That is what Jesus came to do,
 - to free us for love - love for God and love for our neighbour.
- And this is our calling also, as the people of God in this place:

- to do acts of power in Jesus name in order that we and others around us may find relief from the things that possess us and the things that oppress us.
- And in all of this, there are a couple of other things I want to notice.
- First, our Gospel passage this morning is full of extremes.
- Jesus speaks of cutting off a hand or a foot.
- Those are pretty extreme responses.
 - They are large dramatic actions.
- But at the other end of the scale Jesus says,
 - "whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward".
- Giving a cup of water is actually a pretty small thing, certainly in comparison to cutting off a hand,
 - yet it is also something that will be "rewarded" in the sense that it has an effect disproportionate to its size.
- Giving a cup of water is about recognising and meeting a need.
- It is an act of hospitality, generosity and care and those things may be welcomed just as much as we welcome the sensation of water in our mouths to relieve our thirst.
- I say this not to diminish our sense of what a deed of power is, but to notice the potentially huge effect of small actions.
- Giving a cup of water can go a long way because it is not just the water that is received but the care and generosity that is also experienced in the giving.
- The second thing I want to notice is that the disciples complain to Jesus that this stranger who has cast out demons in Jesus' name is not "one of us".
- But when Jesus responds to their complaint by saying,
 - "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me",
- ...he is inviting the disciples to understand that the work of God among us is not to keep us apart or to create divisions between us.
- Rather, the deeds of power we are called and enabled to do are so that we can become part of one another, members of one body, part of a shared community of life and love.
- The activity of God, the power of God, works to restore and reconcile, not to destroy or to antagonise.

- And that is the work to which we are all called.

- So we thank God for our calling to be both agents and recipients of God's deeds of power,
 - deeds done in the name of Jesus to bring us relief from the things that oppress us and the things that possess us,
 - deeds done to free us for love.