

# Scandal, or how I can clear obstacles out of the way

Sermon for the 26th Sunday of the year (B)  
on September 28th/29th 2024 in St Sebastian's Cathedral

Mark 9:38–48

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*From the gospel of Mark:*

<sup>38</sup>John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us."

<sup>39</sup>Jesus replied, "Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me.

<sup>40</sup>For whoever is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup>Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward. <sup>42</sup>"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe (in me) to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. <sup>43</sup>If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire. <sup>44</sup> And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna. <sup>47</sup>And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, <sup>48</sup>where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'

Bernhard, why did you come here? Bernade, ad quid venisti? Bernard, why have you come here? A young man had to put up with this question when he knocked on the door of the Citeaux monastery. What kind of person was he - would he fit in with his own people? The young man wanted to enter, to become a monk. But he didn't know the answer to the question of what he had come to do. And Bernhard had to stay outside. For three days, because on the following day he had no

answer either, not until the third. This young man then became a monk, later also a great and famous one, he was called Bernard of Clairvaux, known as a mystic. Bernard, why did you come here? He had to find an answer to this question - to set out in all seriousness.

Dear brothers and sisters! Why have you come here? What are you looking for? Why have you come here? We must also ask ourselves this question! Do we have an answer? Perhaps the answer is: I want to follow Jesus; pray to God; live a good life. That's what I want. But how does that work with the good life?

The Gospel of Mark gives us two clues - because today it is about discipleship and the good life.

There is John, who points out to Jesus his master another person who is casting out demons in Jesus' name. John is irritated because this other person does not belong to his own group. Jesus is completely relaxed:

Do not prevent him. [...] For whoever is not against us is for us.

[Mark 9:39-40](#)

It is obviously important to Jesus that the message should not be an obstacle. If he or she is not an obstacle, then he or she is welcome. Then it is irrelevant whether someone is one of their own or not. And Jesus immediately provides an example - the cup of water that is served for refreshment. Good behaviour does not need to belong to one's own. Because that is where goodness breaks through, and many a Christian can perhaps learn a lesson from others. Jesus seems to be saying to his disciples: what matters is what comes out in the end. It is crucial that the good life - a life in the spirit of Jesus - remember: love God and your neighbour - can become real. Can you recognise this in your fellow human being? If so, you can be completely relaxed when the good simply breaks through.

Jesus is as relaxed about the good in others as he is clear about the evil in his own ranks. For perhaps John's question also has something to do with a false prejudice towards one's own; an arrogance that always sees one's own in a rosier light than the others, the strangers. Jesus knows about the evil in his own ranks, we know, you and I, about

the evil that sometimes prevails in our communities and also in our lives.

And Jesus finds drastic words: he speaks of "offence" and "hell". For "offence", the original reads "σκανδαλίζη". What we translate as "scandal" in German today actually means "an obstacle that is placed in the way so that someone falls over it". Every evil is a nuisance, a scandal, an obstacle that gets in the way of Jesus' message. An obstacle that hinders the message or makes your access to God difficult. And: what we translate as "hell" today is called "Gehenna" in the original; "into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire." ([Mark 9:43](#)) This does not mean what we might imagine hell to be. Gehenna was a real place in Jesus' time: it was a valley near Jerusalem. The city's rubbish was dumped there and burned. A rubbish pit in which the fire never went out. The disciples should not end up in this rubbish pit. They should stand for the message that can spread without hindrance.

Hence Jesus' appeal with the reference to the disease-causing parts in people - symbolised by "hand", "foot" and "eye". The appeal: change your life, separate yourself from what makes you ill, where you are perhaps standing in your own way, so that the message we stand for - you and I - can go our way. Work on yourself. Identify the annoyances that exist in your life. And work on them - grow, become whole, lead a good life.

And this appeal of Jesus - to deal with the offence - is addressed to the community as a whole: so that everything abusive in his church is no more. That is not a scandal, not an obstacle to the message. So that this church does not end up on the rubbish heap of history. And no one can hear the good news anymore. Therefore, the community must work on itself, become better, stop the abuses - there is no other way.

And this appeal of Jesus also applies to you and me: I must always ask myself, you must ask yourself: Where do we become obstacles? Even if it is the smallest insincerity that we carry with us. An examination of our conscience can make us honest. In this way, we can continue on the path we have chosen with our Christianity - in all seriousness and determination.

Dear brothers and sisters, perhaps this is a task with which you go back to everyday life: to look closely at yourself - not at others, that is too cheap - to look closely at yourself. Then you, then I, will certainly identify the problem areas that we carry with us. Some will be smaller, some will be more serious: Then start with what is more serious. Start there! Just concentrate on that - the rest will fall into place. Observe exactly which obstacles you are in danger of falling over - and change! In the evening, look back on the day: look at what you didn't manage to do; be happy about what you did manage to do; and then - keep practising! I am sure that with the necessary perseverance you will make good progress.

Bernhard, why did you come here? What did you come here for? The answer could be: To lead a good life - to live the way Jesus, God intended me to, without obstacles. Yes - that's what I came here for.

By Deacon Thomas

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