

## **An Arm and a Leg**

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22

Mark 9:38-50

Here is the LOST CHAPTER IN GENESIS....

Adam was walking around the garden of Eden feeling very lonely, so God asked him, "What is wrong with you?"

Adam said he didn't have anyone to talk to. God said that He was going to make Adam a companion and that it would be a woman.

He said, "This person will gather food for you, cook for you, and when you discover clothing she'll wash it for you.

She will always agree with every decision you make. She will bear your children and never ask you to get up in the middle of the night to take care of them.

She will not nag you and will always be the first to admit she was wrong, when you've had a disagreement. She will never have a headache and will freely give you love and passion whenever you need it.

Adam asked God, "What will a woman like this cost?" God replied, "An arm and a leg." Then Adam asked, "What can I get for a rib?" The rest, they say, is history...

Today's passage taken from the Gospel according to Mark is a difficult one since it seems to be telling us that we must maim ourselves in order to be acceptable to God. Salvation sounds as though it might well cost us an arm and a leg, or more.

And yet, today's passage follows closely on the passage in which the disciples were getting side-tracked by an argument concerning who was the greatest. When John tells Jesus about the

person who is casting out demons, it is to distract Jesus from the discussion of greatness. He is seeking to deflect Jesus from further criticism of the disciples, and tosses in the remark about someone else as a diversion. But Jesus is not so easily diverted.

Jesus is still seeking to help his followers understand that God's realm is one of inclusiveness. God wants us all to be part of that realm. The disciples still want to be part of a select elite. The disciples still don't get it. And neither do we. In the year 2009 we are often as confused about this whole issue as those first disciples. And all of the illustrations which follow are meant to challenge us to think in larger terms, broader terms, to begin to understand the incredible graciousness of our God, a God who sent us a human model because we couldn't quite grasp the concept without one.

But we still struggle with who's on the inside. Our own denomination is repeatedly involved in discussions of membership and who is or is not a member, and it doesn't revolve around the issue of faith. The Vatican recently declared that salvation in its fulness comes only through the Roman Catholic church. The attempts by various denominations of the Christian faith to determine who will be admitted to God's realm and who won't are familiar to most of us. Many of us have personally experienced those who seek to deny our faith as valid. And most of us are uncomfortably aware of the times when we have sought to exclude others. It's reminiscent of the story told of someone arriving at the Pearly Gates, and being ushered in by St. Peter, who escorts the individual, and as they are passing a room with a closed door, Peter puts his finger to his lips

and cautions silence until they are safely past and then explains: “That’s the room with the ..... And here you can fill in the denomination of your choice. We have to be quiet because they think they’re the only ones here.” It makes me smile but I wonder if God smiles or sighs at how silly we are. What makes us think that we know who and who is not eligible for the kingdom of God?

It is against this background that we can hear Jesus addressing his disciples: “Whoever is not against us is for us.” In today’s language, Jesus is saying: “Hello, we’re all in this together folks. Remember, I told you it isn’t about personal status? It isn’t about being the elite, it’s about seeking to bring the good news of God’s love and compassion to more people, not about keeping them out.”

And the injunctions to pluck out an eye or to cut off an arm, are challenges to remove anything that gets in the way of making our faith more inclusive. And it may not be a part of our body that helps us to deny others. Perhaps it’s watching television so that we can immerse ourselves in a world of fantasy rather than address the needs of our immediate neighbours. If television gets in the way of reaching out, turn it off, or pull the plug. If the computer allows you to spend your time playing games or even using the Internet so that you can relate to people who will never make real demands on you, then turn off the computer. If sports or fitness help you to focus exclusively on yourself and the state of your own body, then walk away from them.

Jesus is challenging us to let go of anything and everything that prevents us from reaching out to people around us, or that makes us feel superior to our friends or neighbours. Things are not in and of

themselves evil. But when we use things to ensure our sense of superiority, when we use them to foster our sense of importance, then it is time for us to cut them off in whatever way is necessary so that we may be more faithful and more responsive.

Even the act of baptism. Baptism reminds us that we are loved and accepted and washed in grace even when we are of no particular use to anyone else. Babies are dependent, demanding beings. But babies make us smile and remind us that love flows freely from a gracious God. God's grace needn't cost us an arm and a leg, or even a rib. All that we have to do is to let go of our need for personal importance so that once again we may be drawn together as the body of Christ, embracing one another as the Christ embraces us. Thanks be to God. Amen.