

Sunday 10th October 2021
Trinity 19 (Safeguarding Sunday)

Heb. 4:12-16 and Mark 10:17-31

As my family will tell you, whilst inwardly groaning, I've always been tempted by short-cuts!

Whether it be trying to find the quickest way to get from A to B, or maybe doing some detestable DIY task like putting together self-assemble furniture! And I also have an intense dislike of reading instructions!

We've had some interesting results in our time. Some of my so-called short-cuts have taken us miles out of our way, or I have got almost to the end of putting together some piece of furniture, only to realise I'm left with the one vital piece that should have been put in right back at the beginning!

And I'm sure that I'm not the only one here who when thinking they've spotted an easy way of achieving a difficult task, will all be tempted to give it a go!

Life is often beset with problems, and problems can be painful!

It's human nature to try to avoid pain, and therefore, to try to avoid problems. And there are a number of different mechanisms which we employ to avoid those problems – for taking short cuts! Mechanisms which seem to have worked for us in the past, at least occasionally and at least on the surface. And which, therefore, we turn to again and again. We each have our own particular pattern, and we tend to repeat that pattern throughout life as we struggle to avoid the pain of problems.

One pattern, for instance, is to go into denial, perhaps by procrastinating, putting off until tomorrow, what can and should be done today, because at least that avoids the pain of problem-solving for another day. And then the problem might just go away. Or sometimes, we can turn the problem into something less threatening by giving it a different name, like calling it, not 'problem', but 'challenge'.

Another pattern is doing absolutely nothing in life, so that nothing can ever go wrong. If I never make any suggestions or offer my help in any way, then I'm not going to get into any trouble if things don't work out. Nobody can blame me. A bit like the man who buried his talents in a field, because he was afraid of getting it wrong and possibly having to face his master's anger.

Or think of Jonah and Elijah in the Old Testament, both had a running away pattern. They both ran away from God, hoping that physical distance would cause the problem to disappear. And people today run away in many different directions.

The trouble is, that as the human spirit avoids facing problems, so it ceases to grow. Rather than growing, it begins to shrivel up and to die.

The rich man who approached Jesus in today's story from St. Mark's gospel, was aware of something lacking in his own life. And he seems to have recognised in Jesus some depth, some new and exciting and vibrant and living quality to life, and he wanted to have it too. But he didn't want the pain of growth. He wanted a short cut – a short cut to eternal life.

Interestingly, and rather surprisingly, in the answer Jesus gave him, he ignored the first five commandments, the four about God, and the one about keeping the Sabbath Day special, and launched straight into the five social commandments, the ones about community life. Don't kill,

don't commit adultery, don't steal, honour your parents and love your neighbour.

This caused the man to move into denial. He maintained he'd kept these commandments all his life, and he denied there was anything wrong, even though there must have been plenty of poverty and human suffering all around him.

In the gospel of the Nazarenes, an early gospel which never found its way into the Canon of the Bible, Jesus is reported as saying to the man: *"How can you say, I have fulfilled the law when many of your brothers, sons of Abraham, are covered with filth, dying of hunger, and your house is full of many good things, none of which go out to them?"*

In the version we know, Mark's version, Jesus didn't question the man's self-assessment. But he did move him out of the comfort zone, the short cut zone, and into the pain zone. *"Go and sell everything you have,"* he suggested, *"and give to the poor."*

And so, he engaged in that avoidance pattern – he went away.

And Jesus let him go. He made no attempt to persuade him, or to cajole him, or even to engage him in discussion. For the decision to avoid short cuts and take the long and arduous and painful road, can only be a personal one, freely taken.

'Master, what must I do to gain eternal life?'

That's not the man in today's Gospel speaking, but rather it's the question we should all be asking each time we pray for guidance in our lives.

And in our first reading we were reminded, as Jonah and Elijah both found out, that we can never get away with taking short-cuts to avoid God's watching, caring love!

Usually, if a short cut doesn't work out, it's a nuisance and inconvenient, but no real harm is done. But there are areas of life where short cuts can be really dangerous, and can put life at risk.

On this Safeguarding Sunday, I can't help but think of historic tragic scenarios like the death of "Baby Peter" or those infamous Soham Murders where two young girls lost their lives because proper Safeguarding procedures had been skimped!

I am proud that we are a Parish which takes safeguarding seriously, and that we have Brian our hugely competent Parish Safeguarding Officer, and Katherine, our PCC Safeguarding Liaison, who, supported by Jackie and Jane from the Diocese make sure that we don't take shortcuts, and that we take every possible precaution in keeping our young people and vulnerable adults safe.

You see, safeguarding is one of those areas where we just cannot ever take short-cuts!

'Master, what must I do to gain eternal life?'

And the reply will come, flooding across 2,000 years of history: *'For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter it are many. But the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life. And those who find it are few.'*

There are no shortcuts: *'Enter by the narrow gate'!*