

" Stumbling blocks or building blocks?"
(Mark 9:38-50)
September 26, 2021

What were the Jewish authorities famous for in the New Testament? They were famous for maintaining the holiness of the Israelites. They would do anything they could to separate themselves from the rest of the world. Do you think all the Jewish authorities had the same intention on that? According to the Bible, the High Priest and other priests responsible for the Temple and the sacrifices therein did an outstanding job. Money-changers were allowed to conduct their business around the Temple. This measure ensured that the currencies from the outside world would not mix with the temple money. Merchants were allowed to sell animals there, so even the Jews who traveled to Jerusalem from other lands would not have to worry about bringing animals with them, whether they would be accepted for sacrifice according to the current standards. Other than the customs related to the Temple, who would ascertain that the people were behaving in their daily living? Pharisees and law teachers were the ones. They passed on traditional teachings so that all would follow the same rules. Through education in the synagogues, people learned when and how to show thanksgiving, to observe the Sabbath, other Jewish festivals, and more. So, even though they might have to earn their living in the contaminated world and get contaminated, they wouldn't forget the principles. The priests, Pharisees, and law teachers worked together, offered solutions to people to reclaim their holiness if they did something wrong. That's how they nurtured themselves in their culture and strengthened it.

Are we not worshipping and living with the same pattern? We don't follow the Code of Holiness (Lev 17-26) as written in the Bible since the Temple, priests, and slaves do not exist in the modern world. But we keep building new systems to help the preservation of our present cultures. We have local churches under different denominations; we see various forms of democracy, dictatorship in various countries supporting their status quo. Very few people would ask the question if it's good or bad. It's simply practical. They do things differently depending on where they are.

Pharisees produced new rules and made amendments to cover different scenarios in daily living so that people wouldn't be confused. They set strict laws which prevent people from doing wrong things, but at the same time, they were amenable since they sometimes adopted elements of foreign beliefs, like angels. They created a new culture in which they lived a restrictive life but with religious liberty. Sadducees, however, went on a different way. They refused to adopt foreign elements into their beliefs. They rejected both angels and resurrection and held a position that considered things that are not forbidden in the Bible mean allowed. So, they maintained a culture in which people kept a restrictive belief but gained liberty in their daily living. The preservation of these arbitrary practices continues in our present real-life situations. In Quebec, it's illegal to drive through private property, like a gas station, to get around a red light or make a right turn on red lights, but not so in the other provinces of Canada. Why? Recreational marijuana is now legal in Canada but might not be so in other countries. Oh! Laws stipulating the marriage between cousins are different everywhere. Really? So, if we travel around the world and get to know the cultures everywhere, we might be confused about why and how people hold onto

certain specific values. Are the reasons that reinforce the belief that we are different from each other legitimate?

"Do not stop him," Jesus said, "For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me." Jesus wanted his disciples to have the spirit of tolerance. When Jesus said further, "For whoever is not against us is for us." Jesus indicated a further step of tolerance is acceptance. Jesus wanted his disciples to undergo a process of life transformation. Their attitudes must be changed, i.e., how they viewed aliens, strangers, the marginalized, and the outsiders.

Was Jesus too demanding? Not really. Is it hard to give a cup of water to one who is in need? Is it too hard to embrace the little ones? Showing empathy to the little ones, to the neglected was essential to Jesus' ministry. Tolerance might be the first step, but acceptance of the vulnerable must come after. Even though it might cost them an arm and a leg, it's worth it to stand on their side.

"Salt is good ... Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other." What did Jesus imply by salt? Everyone has a right to one's thoughts. Everyone has a right to think things out and to think them through until one can conclude. We should respect this right. However, there's a problem. Do we care if the thoughts are right or wrong?

Take aesthetics as an example. My personal opinion is that there's no right or wrong. Some might like this realist artwork because of its precise, detailed, and accurate representation of scenes and objects, while some might like this impressionist artwork because it looks like an unfinished one. What about this cubist artwork with the subject matter analyzed, broken up, and reassembled? The artist presented the subject matter from many viewpoints in a greater

context. Idealism, impressionism, cubism, and more of these -isms are the salts. They existed at different times in history for their reasons. They represented what human beings can perceive this world differently in their spiritual journeys. And saltiness is the influence that they could make. Some might like it, while some might not.

If the likes and dislikes would not affect those surrounding the person who holds the opinion, further discussion would probably be confined within a particular group of people. We don't even need to discuss it. What if the opinions, the likes, and dislikes will affect everyone in society? E.g., "I have the right to do something, but you don't," "I am strong, and you are weak," "I am going to make an important decision for myself ... and for you too!" When a decision might step on someone else's toes, it's better to ensure that it's made with good intention. "Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other." Salt is something like knowledge and understanding, but it's not just that. Knowledge and understanding can be divisive, but if one chooses the right delivery channel, the result might be very different. With the intention to bring people together in peace, saltiness would be invaluable.

It's storytime.

A man possessed a ring set with a wonderful opal. Whoever wore the ring became so sweet and true in character that all people loved him. The ring was a charm. Always it was passed down from father to son, and always it did its work. As time went on, it came to a father who had three sons whom he loved equally. What was he to do when the time came to pass on the ring? Do you know what the father did? He got two more rings made that looked precisely like the original so that none could tell the difference. On his death-bed he called each of his sons in, spoke some words of love and to each privately, and gave each a ring. When the three sons discovered that each had a ring, a

great dispute arose. Who was the owner of the true ring? The case was taken to a wise judge. He examined the rings, and then he spoke. "I cannot tell which is the magic ring," he said, "but you yourselves can prove it." "We?" said the sons in astonishment. "Yes," said the judge, "for if the true ring gives sweetness to the character of the man who wears it, then I and all the people in the city will know. So, go your ways, and be kind, be truthful, be brave, be just in your dealings, and he who does these things will be the owner of the true ring."

Be a stumbling block or a building block? It could be our choice or not our choice. It's not our choice if we don't seek to understand the subject matter and rethink what we are doing. It's our choice if we try to find salt among ourselves, salt that keeps its saltiness, so that all can be at peace with each other. Amen.