

Sermons at the Anglican Church of Luxembourg
Preached by Evelyn Sweerts on 30 September 2018
Text: Numbers 11.4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Mark 9.38-50.

Well those are certainly somewhat strange and challenging texts! There's a lot going on in them, seemingly different things, but there are underlying themes. One of these is responsibility, particularly: who is responsible for what?

In the Numbers reading, the Israelites think Moses is responsible; Moses thinks God is responsible; together they decide to spread the responsibility across 70 elders and then the question is raised: but who actually can prophesy? Who has *that* responsibility? And this gift of prophesy is itself a window into the complexities of how divine and human responsibility interact: God gives the gift but the humans must use it.

And then in Mark: who is responsible for casting out demons? Who is permitted and given responsibility to use the name of Jesus? Who is responsible for preventing sin? More generally we might ask: what are the responsibilities of a disciple?

These questions get to the heart of the divine-human relationship and the complexities and tensions inherent therein. If we say it's all about God – whether we prefer to think in terms of God, Jesus or Holy Spirit – we run the risk of abdicating our responsibilities. If we think it's all about us and our efforts, we miss the point that “unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain” as the psalmist says.

So we must do the hard work of negotiating the tension between these two extremes and somehow stay engaged enough to do our part, whatever that may be, yet humble enough to recognise and be open to the role of God within that.

There is guidance to be found in these passages.

From Moses we learn the value of taking the reality of where we're at to God in prayer. Moses doesn't just put up with everything because he's the leader: he knows God commissioned him and that ultimately these are God's people, not his, so God needs to play his part in solving the problem.

We also learn that God does, indeed, help to solve the problem. God does not abdicate his responsibilities but shares his spirit. And the solution requires action from both Moses and others.

In the end the cry of Moses' heart is that responsibility for the discipleship of the Israelites would not fall only on him, or even only on the 70 specially commissioned elders, but on all God's people by all receiving God's spirit. This breaks the limitations of having a special in-group that has responsibility and opens up a truly inclusive worshipping community in which all are empowered. Who, ideally, has responsibility? Everyone.

In Mark's Gospel, the disciples are irritated that their special responsibility was, in their view, being usurped by an outsider. A healer has been casting out demons in Jesus' name but – shock horror – “he was not following us”. In other words, he was not part of our special in-group. But Jesus expresses a similar attitude to Moses. Jesus' response could be summed up as, “Would that all people cast out demons in my name!”

Jesus then goes on to describe more of the disciples' responsibilities: they are to welcome 'little ones' – new believers, whatever their age – and are responsible for ensuring they never behave in a way that would cause these new believers to sin. The disciples, and by extension we, have responsibilities towards those new to the faith, or new to our community.

The rather troubling section about cutting off hands and feet and gouging out eyes may be understood as typical rabbinical exaggeration to make a point. This underlying point is a reflection on how serious a problem sin is, and just how valuable entering God's kingdom is. The disciples are given the responsibility for rooting out the things that lead them to sin and for choosing

to enter God's kingdom. These are really two sides of the same coin, as sin has no place where God reigns.

Likewise the disciples are to have salt in themselves – it doesn't appear to be something given by God – and to be at peace with each other. This too is framed as *their* responsibility.

Does this feel like Jesus making it all a human project of self-improvement, doomed to failure because well, we're human? It won't surprise you that it's not. It simply reflects how much God values human freedom. No divine flick of the wrist is capable of straightening out either the Israelites or us without compromising human freedom. If God wants a mature child, the possibility of defiance must be risked. Israel's time in the wilderness is shaped by God's extraordinary patience and mercy, just as our journey through life on earth is shaped by God's loving-kindness. He can't just come along and wave a magic wand and make us all perfect because to do so would be to deny our fundamental dignity as people made in God's image who are free to choose gratitude or complaint, inclusion or exclusion, peace or conflict, love or hate. In short, we are free to follow Jesus and enter the kingdom, or to turn away.

There can be no true responsibility without freedom, no true freedom without responsibility. And it's this challenge – enjoying freedom and being responsible despite our imperfections – that means we have to live in the sometimes uncomfortable space between God being responsible and discipleship being a human project.

Although it's not obvious from this passage, we know help is available. The Holy Spirit – who makes prophets of the 70 – is also available for us if we ask, providing comfort, guidance and power for living as disciples of Jesus. We can live in the messy interplay of our freedom and responsibility and God's freedom and responsibility through the power of the Spirit.

Let's go forth and embrace our Jesus-given responsibilities to be welcoming and inclusive, to care for new believers and to be at peace with one another.

Let us do so with gratitude, knowing it is an expression of our God-given freedom. And let's recognise the Spirit's work in us that makes it all possible.