Today’ gospel contains a group of somewhat different sayings of Jesus. The last two touch on the theme of scandal, of causing people to stumble morally or spiritually, of leading them into acting in ways that are both destructive and self-destructive. We might do this kind of thing by encouraging friends or colleagues to drink more than they can handle or to try harder drugs or to become part of some dishonest scheme involving money or influence. The possibilities are all but endless. Things like these happen, unfortunately, in families, at work, or on the internet.

The specific example Jesus offers here is scandalizing “little ones who believe.” In the gospels, the phrase “the little ones” sometimes refers to children and sometimes, as is probably the case here, to average believers.

Jesus was harsh in his judgment of anyone who abused children or who failed to care for them. He was equally harsh in his condemnation of those who deliberately set out to undermine the faith of believers or who seduced them away from the kind of life that God through Jesus was calling them to live. In order to underline the seriousness of such things, Jesus says that it would be better for people doing them to have a millstone hung around their neck and be thrown into the sea.

If this saying focuses on the way that we can be a stumbling block or source of scandal for others, the saying that follows it speaks of ways in which we can undermine our own efforts to live a moral and spiritual life.

In saying what he does, Jesus here, as so often, is deliberately provocative. He wants to catch our attention, to make us think. It is not our hand or foot or eye that on its own is the cause of our moral failures. It is we with our mind and heart and will who freely choose to steal or cheat or give in to feelings of anger, revenge, jealousy and envy. We are ultimately responsible for what we do and for the habits or dispositions of soul that develop over time through the repetition of such actions.

The idea of cutting off a limb or an organ to avoid falling into immoral behaviour suggests the need we sometimes have to cut off certain relationships or to change a certain pattern of behaviour which is clearly leading us to make choices that some day we will deeply regret.

The internet has become an enormously sophisticated tool for both good and evil. To take but one example, experts tell us that there is more pornography on the net than anything else. Some people are led step by step through various forms of it until they end up embracing child and other extreme forms of it.

Although the language Jesus uses in this saying is not the language we use, the human reality to which it points continues to be our reality. In our struggles to be decent, kind, generous, honest, faithful, loving we can be our own worst enemy.

The first saying in the reading introduces a different theme. The disciples complain about a man calling on the name of Jesus in order to free someone from demonic possession. One has the impression that the disciples took the man’s act as some kind of personal affront to them. “We tried to stop him,” they say, “because he was not following us.” Jesus chides them and in doing so shows himself to be a good deal more open than they are. “Whoever is not against us,” he says, “is for us.”

When I was a child, there were relatively few Catholics in Toronto. Making up as we did some 10 to 12 % of the population, we had the kind of mentality that such situations almost inevitability breed. It was a little bit of “us versus them.”

One of the important achievements of the Second Vatican Council was to break out of that kind of attitude. Other Christians, whom, in the past, we thought of primarily as heretics became, almost overnight, our separated brothers and sisters, people who share our faith in God and Christ and who want to collaborate with us in joint efforts for peace, justice and for much else that is reflective of gospel values.

Something analogous can be said of our relation to Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus as well as to members of other religious traditions. The Council has had an enormous impact on our relationship with all such groups. The development of more open and more positive attitudes in this whole area has been a great help to us as we learn to live our own faith with integrity in a pluralistic society.