

## Sermon for Sept 27<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> after Trinity

Just before the gospel passage for today Jesus had been teaching his disciples about the kingdom of God and preparing them for his journey to Jerusalem and almost certain death. Mark is not exactly flattering about Jesus' closest followers. After three years with Jesus they still have not grasped who he is or what he really is about. Just before this incident, Peter, James and John have been with Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration and seen him revealed in glory, affirming that he is God's Messiah; they've come down to re-join the rest of the disciples, to be confronted with a crowd, complaining that the other disciples have been unable to heal an epileptic boy in the crowd. But Jesus heals him. Later, having again told them that he is going to be killed he catches them arguing about who's going to be greatest in the kingdom.: contrary to their expectations, he says it's the least, the person who is willing to be the servant. And, in today's reading we find the disciples in a cross mood, feeling miffed! "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." In the name doesn't just mean that the man used Jesus' name. It means he acted in the power of Jesus. Perhaps they saw this outsider to be like we'd perceive an unlicensed doctor -- who should immediately be reported to the authorities and whose illegitimate activities should be stopped. The disciples expected Jesus to be angry - but he wasn't. In effect he said - "it doesn't matter to me if those people are a part of this group or not. What matters is that they are doing the things that God wants. They are a part of God's family. Jesus' rebuke must have surprised them. From their reaction it seems the Twelve saw themselves as a, specially-selected group privy to Jesus' special attention and teaching. They believed that because of their close relationship with the Master they had been "rewarded" with the power to cast out demons, as well as to preach and teach in Jesus' name.. So perhaps you can understand their irritation at this apparent outsider's success .

There seems to be something about human beings which leads us to identify and reject other people who don't quite fit our particular insider group. . There seems to be something in us that defines us by who's in and who's out and to regard with suspicion the 'not one of us', to be suspicious or envious of what they do, especially if it's in competition with us. But Jesus is not having any of the disciples' complaint or expressed concern, He says "*He who is not against us is for us*" and therefore won't speak ill of me or oppose me in future. These words of Jesus are a rebuke to all **our** blind exclusiveness, our arrogant assumptions, that God's action in the world is limited to the forms which we are familiar or find congenial.

The Jewish religion of Jesus' day was very definite about who was or was not in. And that was at least part of the reason the religious authorities opposed him, because the kingdom of God that he proclaimed included people who they regarded as total outsiders and outcasts. Jesus was inclusive. Sadly, it is something that we in the church

sometimes struggle with. We often proclaim God's love for all it but it's much harder to act on. Often our default setting is instead "*He who is not with us is against us*". It's nothing new. In the Old Testament lesson, the Jews are on their journey in the Wilderness, complaining about food, and Moses then complains to God about them. Joshua, Moses' assistant and successor goes complaining to Moses. Two men, Eldad and Medad, had not gone to the Tabernacle as instructed, to receive the spirit of prophecy but had prophesied in the camp. Joshua wanted Moses to stop them, but Moses answered them, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all Yahweh's people were prophets, that Yahweh would put his Spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29 WEB). Jewish authorities sought to stop the Christian movement. Stephen was stoned, James killed, Peter and Paul thrown into prison, early believers driven out of Jerusalem. Peter and the apostles would have been killed except that a Jewish Pharisee in the Council, Gamaliel, stood up and said, "You men of Israel, be careful concerning these men, what you are about to do.... Now I tell you, withdraw from these men, and leave them alone. For if this counsel or this work is of men, it will be overthrown. But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow it, and you would be found even to be fighting against God!" Down the centuries, Christians have even killed each other because they disagreed over finer points of doctrine. John Wesley preached in the fields because the Church of England of which he was a priest, would not let him preach in church buildings.

Even now, after 2000 years of Christianity it still happens. Different religious affiliations are used to judge others in advance and our refusal to see goodness and love in outsiders is not just confined to people of other faiths.. I was brought up in downtown Liverpool in the 50s. There was deep mistrust of RCs. Anything charitable they did was often regarded with suspicion as a hook to snare unwary people into the net of Catholicism. It hardly seems believable now but in the early 60s Methodists were often regarded and treated as 'not one of us' by the Cof E, How easy it is to overlook the genuine expressions of goodness and love in other denominations, let alone other faiths. For example, Protestants have not been very good at acknowledging Jehovah's witnesses stand for pacifism We may run our own Church charities; seeing this as Christianity in action, yet prefer to remain ignorant or judgmental about, say the followers of Islam, who place a high priority on almsgiving, and charities like Islamic Relief working in Leicester, who we heard about on Thursday night in the cathedral. And does our zeal for the gospel -- or perhaps, more honestly, our fear of those who are different from us -- placing a stumbling block before people of other faiths that makes it harder for them to see and feel the love of God in Christ? .

I wonder how different the world would be if only we really embraced that radical inclusiveness of Jesus. The important question for us is' Who do I/ we as church, see as 'not one of us. Who do I want to exclude from being part of Christ's community? Someone or some group I regard with hostility or suspicion?

God in Christ's love is larger than our attempts to confine it. We're always being called to catch up. Jesus did not condemn the man who was not part of the insider group. He reserved his stinging criticism for **insiders** who put stumbling blocks in the way of little ones. When he talks of 'little ones' it's probably not children he means, but people who are new to, or on the edge of faith,. It may be a particular trap for those of us who are most closely bound up with the church as an institution. We can easily get prickly when we think our position or standing in church is under attack; Sometimes we're no different from Jesus' disciples; there is always the temptation to want to preserve our authority and power and status as insiders, excluding others, keeping things the way we like them, engaging in petty disputes over furniture, music, decorations etc. Those sort of things and exclusivism can literally be a stumbling block to the faith of people on the edge or new to church. Jesus took his disciples to task. And he will challenge us too. Even outsiders can do works of grace and mercy. They may not be ordained or in the right denomination. They may not even be Christian, but Jesus blesses them. Anyone who loves the way of Jesus, ,who wants to follow God and lives out justice and mercy is acceptable. As he said, even giving a cup of water in the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. God's spirit could rest on those outside the Tabernacle. The blessing of God can be upon an unknown exorcist. The whole idea of inside and outside breaks down here here. Let's pray that we may see those others with Christ's eyes and welcome them.

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