

March 14th: The One who is ‘for us’: [Mark 9: 38-41](#): ‘...because he was not one of us.’

The 2020 presidential election emphasised the fault lines that now run through society in the United States of America. I read recently of one person cancelling Christmas plans and another moving her wedding date in order to avoid meeting family members on the other side of the increasingly wide political chasm that is causing such damaging division. The political question in an increasing number of countries seems to be, ‘are you with us or against us?’



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This sort of exclusive mindset has been the cause of some of the deepest wounds of Christian history such as when, in 1054, the Roman Catholic Pope and the Eastern Orthodox Patriarch mutually excommunicated each other causing a tear in the body of Christ that remains unhealed to this day. In 1204, those who had embarked on the Fourth Crusade went even further and destroyed the Christian city of Constantinople, raping nuns and killing indiscriminately as they went about it. To the crusaders, the people of Constantinople were not ‘their kind of Christians’, and were therefore fair game. An apology, from Pope John Paul II, in which he stated, ‘it is tragic that

the assailants, who set out to secure free access for Christians to the Holy Land, turned against their brothers in the faith. The fact that they were Latin Christians fills Catholics with deep regret’, took 800 years to arrive.

In today’s reading Jesus himself is completely relaxed about the activities of the unnamed exorcist who is worrying John purely because he is, ‘not one of us.’ Maybe the stranger had seen Jesus teaching, healing and casting out demons and been inspired to follow suit; we just don’t know. Neither do we know anything about his understanding of who Jesus was and what his ministry was all about. We’ll assume that it was even more limited than that of the disciples whose own grasp on things was pretty shaky at this stage. Yet Jesus doesn’t ask his disciples to grab him and bring him over for a grilling to see what he’s about neither does he seem at all interested in finding out more about him or regard him as any kind of threat.

The simple challenge to John is that if this exorcist is performing miracles in Jesus' name how can he be an adversary and therefore why on earth should anybody try to stop him (v 39)? Yet still today Christians are looking at other Christians from different traditions and maintaining that they are not 'one of us.' Within the Christian church there have always been different understandings of key elements of the faith such as the Bible, the Eucharist, the Church, the Mission of God in the world and the scope of salvation. It is very important that the conversations we continue to have about all these issues and many others remain friendly, mutually affirming and generous. All too often, however, they are rancorous, spiteful and lacking in any kind of warmth. What so often bedevils the conversations we need so much to keep going is the belief that 'we' (whichever part of the Christian tradition 'we' belong to) are absolutely right in what we believe which means that 'they' are necessarily entirely wrong. This often leads people to look on those who take a different view (which could even be a somewhat nuanced version of what they themselves believe) as not proper Christians at all. Now obviously all Christians believe things about Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection and the way in which his followers should behave in the world today but the misguided belief that you can have this faith thing completely buttoned up betrays a breathtaking arrogance entirely out of sympathy with the generosity of spirit Jesus extends to the unnamed exorcist that John disparages.

Of course, for Jesus, any belief is meaningless if your actions don't stack up; as he says elsewhere, 'by their fruits, you will recognise them' (Matt 7 v 16). It is not necessarily those who prophesy, drive out demons or even say, 'Lord, Lord' who are getting it right. Rather it is those who demonstrate in the way they live their lives that they are attentive to the will of God (Matt 7 v 21-22) who are on a meaningful journey of faith. It is noteworthy that here and elsewhere, as in his dealings with the religious authorities of his day, Jesus reserves his harshest criticism for those who say one thing and do another (Matt 23 v 27-28). That is why the final verse of our short passage is so important; anyone who does something as seemingly insignificant as offering a thirsty person a drink of water in Jesus' name is getting it right (v 41). The clear implication is that all of us who take the Christian life seriously should be prepared to work, worship and pray alongside those who, like the unknown exorcist for John, are not part of our Christian tradition and who may have different understandings, ways of worshipping and ways of doing mission to those we most readily relate to. Which begs the question of how well we know people who attend other churches in our community? So why not go along to a different church than your own from time to time and get to know some of your fellow Christians who do things differently. And do this with an open heart as one seeking to learn and grow rather than taking into that experience a sense of spiritual superiority.

There is an echo in this passage of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Mat 25 v 31-46) in which those who minister to Jesus himself by feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty a drink, inviting in the stranger, clothing the naked and visiting the sick and those in prison are entirely unaware of what they are doing (Mat 25 v 37). In the light

of this I'm tempted to push the envelope a bit further and suggest that anyone at all who offers a thirsty person a drink of water or offers any act of kindness to a fellow human being, whatever their beliefs might be (in other words, people of all faiths and none), are doing the compassionate work that is humanity's shared vocation. What Jesus is implying here is that such people, who show themselves by their actions to be doing the work of God, are in an important sense our partners in mission; something implicitly acknowledged by the fact that, as well as Christian relief agencies such as Tear Fund, Christian Aid and CAFOD, the charities who work together on the Disasters Emergency Committee include the secular agency Oxfam and Islamic Relief. This means that when workers from Oxfam dig a bore hole in a village in Africa providing the residents with access to clean water, or when Islamic Relief feed those facing starvation because of the conflict in Yemen, Christians should rejoice because the thirsty are being given a drink and the hungry are being fed (Matt 25 v 35).

None of this means that our own Christian beliefs are compromised; after all, elsewhere in the Bible Paul quotes Greek philosophers Aratus and Epimenides as part of his presentation of the good news in Athens (Acts 17 v 28) and the compiler of the book of Proverbs includes a section based on an Egyptian wisdom book called The Instruction of Amenemope (Prov 22 v 17 – 24 v 22). The message seems to be that 'even though these people don't believe what we believe, when they are saying and doing good things God is at work'. God is working on a much bigger canvas than is often apparent to us with our limited perspective; something that should both challenge us and make us glad.

Questions: Where can you see, both around you and in your own heart, an 'us and them' mentality? How might you challenge this and be changed yourself in the process?

Prayer: Lord, give us generosity of spirit, an open heart and the vision to see what you are doing in the world and be part of it. Amen.