

FOR OR AGAINST?

Mark 9:38-41 [MW18-31]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 30 September 2018

Here's story about taking sides:

A man was arguing with his boss over lunch in a restaurant. While this was happening the man's best mate ran off with the garlic bread and coleslaw. The man shook his head and sighed saying, "I wish he would stop taking sides."

In today's Gospel reading, from Mark chapter nine, we heard Jesus say:

- "anyone who isn't against us, is for us"
- but in Matthew 12:30 and Luke 11:23 Jesus appears to say the exact opposite:
"if you are not on my side, you are against me"

Critics and opponents of the Christian faith use this as yet another example

- that proves Jesus and the Bible are a load of rubbish while many firm believers harmonise what Jesus says to show that with Jesus there is no middle ground
- it is very straight forward and simple, black and white you are either in, or you're out

I just shake my head and say "typical Jesus!"

- there is nothing straight forward about being his follower nothing straight forward about even recognising who is and who is not to be classed as a "follower"
- in one sense it seems there are no hard and fast rules because Jesus says it is both things, at the same time ...

Confused???

- then you'll feel for the disciples they're the ones who have made the effort, left everything behind in order to follow, or try to follow, this enigmatic leader
- and heaven knows it has been anything but easy

So Jesus' "official" disciples have come across someone they do not know

- who was not one of them but yet was using Jesus' name to force out demons and they make him stop
- then they report this to Jesus clearly expecting to get a thumbs up and pat on the back to be congratulated for their conscientiousness
- so imagine their surprise and dismay when Jesus turns the world upside down by in reality telling them off instructing them not to prevent anyone acting in his name
- even if they don't have the 'proper credentials'

Just stop and think about that for a moment: this is huge

- someone who hasn't had the experience and training someone who hasn't shared the journey that they had, with Jesus
- is allowed, by Jesus, to carry on acting in his name

Jesus is in effect saying

- anyone doing the work of bringing health, healing, wholeness to people is doing God's work
- and they should be allowed to get on with it perhaps they should even be encouraged, supported, worked alongside
- note that and note that there is a kind of "test" for this, which I will outline a bit later

Author and teacher Rebecca Trotter says of all this:

I have long thought that we Christians would do well to embrace any and all who walk and work on the side of love, regardless of their theology, religion or ideology ... Unfortunately, the church has long chosen to embrace this idea from the opposite side of the coin. In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus is recorded as saying, "whoever is not for us is against us." This saying has often been used to reject those who, while perhaps sharing the same devotion to love, are not actively for Christianity. And not only those who are not actively for Christianity, but for the same peculiar form of Christianity. This is how we end up with the bizarre spectacle of atheist volunteers being turned away from helping at Christian soup kitchens. Or one group of Christians denouncing another, apparently equally devout group of Christians. It's how we have so many supposed leaders who are able to convince their followers to see the world in "us vs them" terms. "If you're not for us, you are against us."

It seems as if Jesus is saying the exact opposite in Luke's and Matthew's record

- but is he really?
in this case Jesus' words are a response to those who accused him of casting out demons by the power of Satan
- and what Jesus is actually saying is that anyone who is not with him recognizing the hand of God and the work of the Holy Spirit when they see it is against him
- anyone who sees the work of the Holy Spirit and instead of celebrating it, rejects it is against Jesus

When it comes to following Jesus, being in God's Kingdom, being included

- we like to have things black and white but Jesus says, hang on – it's not quite like that
- refrain from making hard and fast rules and blanket judgements because they are ultimately not helpful
- consider each person, each situation, on its merits

Which is kind of mind blowing

- I really feel for those poor disciples
I feel for us trying to make sense of this today
- in fact I can still remember the first time I started wrestling with this kind of issue it was in my second year at theological college as part of a course on the prophet Isaiah
- Isaiah had to give the people of Israel the message that because of their sin and disobedience the Lord God would allow them to be conquered and taken into exile
- which duly happened and they spent many, many miserable years in Babylon

However Isaiah also got to tell Israel the good news that the Lord God

- had heard their cries and would rescue them and take them back home

The amazing thing was that the instrument of their rescue and return

- would be Cyrus, the King of Persia – see Isaiah 41:2
- ... this too duly happened
- Cyrus and his army conquered Babylon and set the exiles free

King Cyrus, who did not know the Lord God

- and who certainly would not have acknowledged the Lord God's authority or influence
- acted as the Lord God's instrument
- as the means of deliverance for the people of God

Someone who does not know God or acknowledge God

- someone who may even be negative towards God
- can act in accordance with the will of God?
- I found that pretty amazing, brain-stretching
- just like, “anyone who isn't against us is for us”

Please mark very clearly and carefully what this does not mean:

- it does not mean anything goes
- it does not mean everything is acceptable
- there is a kind of “test”
- a way of discerning what really is of God, and is to be encouraged and supported

If a person, leader, group or cause glorifies Jesus

- then it is good and is to be commended
- if it does not then it is in rebellion against God
- so it is evil and is to be wholeheartedly resisted

To restate even more clearly

- if a person, especially a leader, draws attention to themselves
- if a group or cause draws attention to itself
- encourages you to develop a relationship, seeks or enjoys your praise
- leads you away from Jesus to glorify itself or yourself
- it is evil
- have nothing to do with it or them

As a kind of 'rule of thumb'

- in any action or speaking, with any person or group
- observe who is getting the glory, honour, accolades
- notice who benefits, who gets the rewards
- the answer to these questions will tell you whether to be for or against

When I was a curate in Taupo, many years ago now

- my first experience of a “Ministers' Fraternal” was salutary
- as an Anglican, representing a 'Traditional' (subtitle: boring and dying) church
- I felt on the outer, barely tolerated by those newer pentecostal-style fellowships
- but at least we fared better than the Roman Catholics
- who were not regarded as Christian by some of the others

We would all have benefitted from the wisdom of Rebecca Trotter who writes: Labeling someone as against us due to differences in doctrine, religion and ideology is foolish in the extreme. As Jesus says in John's gospel: *"The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."* The Spirit moves as it will. It will not be contained by human minds, beliefs and expectations. Failing to recognize the Spirit when it is at work ought to be considered far more dangerous than the possibility that those we associate with may not be pure or righteous enough.

Remember it is the enemy who scatters and sows division

- when we use Jesus' teaching that "whoever is not for us is against us" to divide between "us and them", "believer and non-believer" "orthodox and heretic" and so on, we are playing the role of the one who scatters
- we are in fact rejecting people and throwing them aside as not good enough, not pure enough, not holy enough

Perhaps Jesus has been recorded as saying: "anyone who isn't against us, is for us"

- as well as: "anyone who is not for us is against us" so that we will become not exactly comfortable, but used to dealing with slightly ragged edges and fluid boundaries when it comes to who is in and who is out
- because remember Jesus also said things like:
I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also (John 10:16)
the master reaps where he has not sown and gathers where he scattered no seed (Matthew 25:24)

Rebecca Trotter concludes:

If someone is driven by love, they are for us. If someone wants more peace, joy, patience, justice, mercy and grace in the world, they are for us. Even if they are, as the disciples put it "not one of us". After all, the Spirit moves where it will. And it is our job to gather the harvest, claiming it for the one who is the source of all good things.

What might all this mean for us today, tomorrow, this coming week ... three things:

- our job is to be gatherers of the harvest rather than labellers of who is in or out
- our calling is to seek out acts of love and care, selfless giving and generosity the good, true and beautiful in our fallen world shine the spotlight on them and point to their source, which is God
- our mission is to be faithful followers, disciples who in our lives, speech, actions glorify Jesus and point to Jesus