

'Jesus-People' ...

... rather than 'religious-people'

A reflection given on the on the Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity, 26th September 2021, by the Curate, the Revd Dr Tim Kelly, in the Attended Communion Service.

Mark 9:38-End

I have one strong memory of the playground of junior school in Mickleover, Derby, where I grew up and that was when I was seven years old in the first year of junior school. And the memory was playing 'war' in the playground with my friends. What is 'war', you may ask? Well, that I can barely remember, but I think it involved a lot of shooting with pretend guns, throwing imaginary hand grenades, and a lot of arguing about whether somebody was dead or not.

But that's not what I remember the most about it, and not what came to me today when I hear the gospel reading. What I can still recall quite clearly was how we started a new game of war. It involved someone, anyone, starting with a chant that went something like this (you have to imagine seven year olds doing this - definite rhythm to it as well): "Anybody wants to play WAR? My game. Who's in?" And this would be chanted over and over again. And if you wanted to join the game, you linked arms and shoulders with the person who was chanting (this meant that you were 'in') and then you joined in that rallying call for more players: "Anybody wants to play WAR? My game. Who's in?" And this will go on for a while until you get quite a long line of boys (I think it was mainly boys) marching around the playground, walking in a huge long line linked at the shoulders, chanting together until there were enough players to begin and the imaginary armour was then handed out to each player.

Now I'm not going to talk in any way, shape or form about whether it is a good and healthy thing for seven year old boys to re-enact battle scenes on the playground. I'll leave that up to you to form your own opinion.

But instead, this memory reminded me of how even from an early age, we have a tendency to draw up battle lines: to form alliances; to work out who's in and who's out; to work out, who's with us and who isn't. This possibly extends even into the way that we act sometimes in churches and in Church life, with different groups shouting loudly, "Anybody wants to play Church? My game. Who's in?" And we hear something of this in our gospel reading today - the disciples rush up to Jesus to tell him that they'd heard of someone

casting out demons in his name. But they tried to stop him because he was not following us.

Did you hear that? Not because he wasn't following 'you, Jesus', but because he was not following 'us'. He wasn't part of the disciples' posse, the disciples gang. Now the disciples were possibly expecting a pat on the back from Jesus, but instead they receive quite a different response. He tells them, "Whoever does indeed of power in my name will not be against me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

'US'. Do you hear that again? After challenging their notion of 'us' and reminding them that it's about those working in the power of 'his' name, Jesus is gracious enough to return to use the word 'us', to have taken their concept, to have picked it up, to have enlarged it, and then to have placed it back over them.

Now, recorded earlier in Mark, Jesus had already confronted the tribalism of the Pharisees. For the Pharisees, the rules have become the most important thing. They were known and regarded for their knowledge of the Scriptures and the rules. They didn't just want to follow the rules. They prided themselves on being the best at following the rules, to being number one. That was their path to redemption, or so they thought, to observe the law. And Jesus challenged all of that. But now Jesus is also challenging his own disciples on their perhaps emerging tribalism. "He's not one of us," they say. "He's not like us," they say. And perhaps with Jesus's usual far sight, he's seeing where all this is going to lead: to division; to protectionism; to one section of the Church claiming somehow a privileged position over the other; to different schools of religion forming. He brings them back to the core, by asking not, 'Do they follow you', but 'Do they follow me?'

"Do they call upon my name? Jesus' view of who is with us is incredibly broad. You might have expected him to say, "If you're not with me you're against me". That's the kind of thing you might expect in a gangster film. But listen carefully ... and what he actually says is "If you're not against us, you're for us". Jesus casts the net of inclusion far and wide.

So let me ask you a question. It might be a question that others have asked you. Perhaps Workmates, Friends, people you meet. It's this "Are you religious?" Think about that for a moment. I hope you're beginning to see that there's a challenge in that question. What is MORE important? Is it religion, is it the things we do in church, is in the rules or church structures we've created ... is it the PCC, is the Church of England, or is it our focus on

JESUS, his example and his rescue mission for us? Is religion at our core, or is Jesus at our core?"

Is it religion that drives us? Or is it following Jesus and trying to be more like Him that shapes and guides what we do? For me, if I were asked that question, 'Are you religious?' I might at first hope to redirect the question with my answer: 'I love and follow Jesus: everything else starts from there.' Of course, this does mean that there are things that I try to do and other things that I try not to do - there is a guide for my life, it's not a free fall, and that's a guide provided by Jesus's life, the teaching, hearing his words in the Bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I don't always get it right, but Jesus is the starting point. Jesus is bigger and more important and more fundamental than religion. Religion can fail and exclude where Jesus doesn't. Religion can build up rules and barriers where they don't, in truth, exist.

So perhaps the challenge for us today, inspired by our gospel reading from Mark, is for us to be known as 'Jesus people', more than being known as 'religious people'. To hear that it is Jesus shouting, "Anybody wants to be Church? My game. Who's in?"

Reading Text

Mark 9:38-end

³⁸ John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone* casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' ³⁹ But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. ⁴² 'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. ⁴⁹ 'For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'