

Church of St Edward the Confessor, Lugano

A Sermon preached by Bishop Michael Langrish on 26 Sept 2021 - Trinity 17

Jealous – for good or ill?

Over the past few weeks in our Gospel readings from St Mark we have been following Jesus as he continues his journey towards Jerusalem. In particular, we have been listening to, and reflecting on, what he says to his disciples, and the implications of this for us today. Across today's gospel still falls the shadow of the incident about which we heard last week when Jesus asked the disciples what they had been arguing about along the road, after he had told him about his forthcoming passion. You may recall that they didn't respond, and they had a very good reason to be hanging back in shame. Because, as you may also remember, they had been arguing about who among them should be the greatest; as if Jesus' tragic words about his death had passed right over their heads. In today's gospel one of the disciples who had remained silent now speaks up. It's John - who says, rather self importantly: *"Teacher we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he wasn't following us"*

Yet again we have a picture of disciples who are slow to grasp what following Jesus is really all about. So, once more, Jesus gathers the band of disciples around him and quietly and gently guides and correct them with patient teaching, trying to draw them into the gospel way of understanding and judging life. Things haven't changed much have they? If we are serious about our discipleship, this is what is really happening every Sunday when we gather in the Eucharist like this: very conscious of **our** failures of understanding and action during the past week; and allowing our Lord to once again gather **us** around his word, speaking that word into **our** hearts helping **us** to look at **our** lives afresh, sowing in **our** hearts the good seed of his teaching, and drawing **us** to that confession and repentance whereby he can draw out the bitterness and selfishness that poisons our lives and that of others too

I wonder how often we find ourselves thinking in the same way as John did then. *"Teacher we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he wasn't following us."* Whatever they are up to, they are not really one of us!

I'm sure John was acting from the best of motives. Probably he thought he was defending the truth, speaking up for Jesus, protecting what Jesus was all about. And yet is that what he was really concerned about here? There's very little point in speaking up for Jesus, or indeed defending Jesus' body, the church, if - in so doing - we forget what Jesus was wanting to achieve most of all, and what it is that he has left the church his body to be. For Jesus the focus is always on the good of humankind, the health, the wholeness, what is best, for the

salvation of us **all**. So, we cannot defend truth by safeguarding privilege, and protecting our own vested interests, when so doing means that people in need get passed by or overlooked.

Of course, what the disciples were guilty of here was nothing new. What they were demonstrating is an age old tendency in human beings, at all times and everywhere. So, our first reading from the book of Numbers had a similar story - showing how deeply rooted in human hearts this mentality is to be found. That reading told us of something that happened at the beginning of the people of Israel's journey to the promised land. Moses' assistant, Joshua is informed that two men, who were not formally part of the 70 leaders of Israel, not part of the inner circle, had begun to prophesy, without any official mandate to do so. Joshua's immediate reaction? Irritated and worried, he runs to Moses to ask him to prevent the two from speaking. The older wiser Moses, though, responds to this young zealot, asking: "*are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them*" Numbers 11.29

What worried Joshua, just as it worried John and the other disciples, and perhaps often worries us, is not primarily the healing of the sick or the setting free of those possessed by demons, of compassion for those most in need, but the defence of the interests of one's own group or institution or, even worse than that, one's own personal interests, or the power that the group or institution guarantees to those who belong. But this is not Jesus' way of thinking. His heart is much wider than his disciples hearts, his mercy for the weak and poor is without boundaries, or the kind of petty constrictions that too often befog other human minds: "*There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea, and a fullness in his justice which is more than liberty: for the love of God is broader than the measures of man's mind and the heart of the eternal is wonderfully kind*" as the hymn puts it.

So, Jesus responded decisively to John and the other disciples: "*Do not stop him (the man who is doing good), for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us*". Good, no matter where, and by whom, it is done, comes from God. Whoever helps the needy supports the weak comforts the desperate or despairing, welcomes others, promotes friendship, works for peace, seeks to build up the body, and is ready to forgive is one who comes always from God and is working with God – whatever the label they may choose to wear.

God continually, and often surprisingly, breaks through the limitations of human minds, and the boundaries that we like to create around ourselves, and is, at all times and in all places, and in all sorts of persons, at work characteristically with love and mercy, truth and grace. So, God is in the thirsty person who is given a cup of water **and** in the person who gives it; in the hungry person who is offered a piece of bread and the one who shares it; in the despairing

person who hears a word of love and the one who speaks it. This is the gospel of which the church is a trustee and guardian. However, the Church is not that gospel's sole instrument, certainly not its exclusive owner. The gospel always belongs to God; and is given to us only through Christ. So, the church must always exercise its stewardship of the Gospel with humility and discernment. How tragic it would be for the world if God chose to restrict the wonderful working of his love and mercy only to the narrow confines of that group of stumbling misunderstanding human beings that have the privilege of being called to be his church. If both God and the world are totally dependent on you and me, then God help the world! Which, fortunately he does! Think of the words of Jesus himself: *"The wind blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes"*. John 3/8

The spirit of God is truly great and boundless. Blessed are we if we know how to recognise that spirit, and welcome it into our lives with humility, generosity, and love. More than that, we are told, we must be attentive to, and led by, the spirit, not grieve him with our inattentive and self-concerned hearts. That is why so many of our quarrels and disagreements about rights or position that are not focused on the core intention of the ministry of Jesus to preach the Kingdom and heal the sick, are so sad and foolish and so grieve his heart.

What he longs for, and what we need constantly, is a so much wider vision that helps us to recognise the workings of God spirit in the world, and then to cooperate with that work of the Spirit, wherever it may be found, with eagerness and joy. We shouldn't be sad, as the apostle John was, if we see that other persons, who don't belong to our little circle or group, are at work bringing healing, or release, or wholeness, to the hurting people of this world. Jesus rejoiced in seeing that many others were being healed and returned to health wherever this was taking place. As one writer has put it: *"The joy of the Lord joy is in a person who is fully alive"* *"I have come"* Jesus said *"that human beings may have life and have it in all its fullness"* as God intends.

And it is the frustration of this intention that draws out Jesus anger, and causes him to rebuke his errant disciples in no uncertain terms. What really bothers **him** is, not so much people who don't bear his name doing his will; but much more those who **do** bear his name **not** doing his will, and letting their own prejudices and presumptions get in the way of all that he came to do. That's why he says to the disciples, in words that sound harsh today and probably sounded as harsh to them: *"if your hand or foot or eye causes you to stumble tear them out. It's better for you to enter the Kingdom of God lame, than to be thrown into hell."* The real scandal here for Jesus is not someone doing good things without his explicit authorization. Rather it is acting in any way that causes someone who is weak or needy to stumble; to fall without support, to

become damaged or hurt. We so often think that happiness is to be found in protecting ourselves, in walking unharmed through life's challenges and difficulties, without ever having to lose too much. To the contrary, Jesus says that happiness is found in precisely the opposite: spending our life for the gospel in giving life for others, rather than conserving it all to ourselves. As St Paul recalled Jesus saying *"it's more blessed to give than to receive"* (Acts 20.35)

The core challenge of this week's gospel is both simple and demanding. It's: let us take at least one eye off ourselves and keep it firmly focused on what is best for others; and life will then certainly be fuller for both them and ourselves as well. Let us use at least one hand to help someone who is suffering or in need, or for the good of the community as a whole, and both we and they will taste something of the joy that Jesus takes in what is being done. Let us take just one step, move just one foot, along the path of the gospel with eyes open to where God is already at work in the world, willing to join in as and when we can, and we will be witnesses to God's love and recipients of his grace. In this way we will understand a little more of what Jesus is telling us that: *"those who find their life will lose it and those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel they are the ones who will find it"*

Numbers 11.4-6, 10-16, 24-29

⁴The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! ⁵We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; ⁶but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.'

¹⁶So the Lord said to Moses, 'Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you.'

²⁴So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. ²⁵Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.

²⁶Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷And a young man ran and told Moses, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.'²⁸And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, 'My lord Moses, stop them!' ²⁹But Moses said to him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!'

Mark 9.38-end

³⁸John 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.'³⁹But 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. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For 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. ⁴³If 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. ⁴⁵And 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.' ⁴⁷And 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, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹ 'For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt 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.'