

27th September 2015

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: **8** **“God with us: Creator, Father”**
 415 **“The Church of Christ, in every age”**
 416 **“There’s a wideness in God’s mercy”**
 526 **“Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy”**

READINGS: Psalm 124
Mark 9:38-50

“FOR US OR AGAINST US?”

We heard that fascinating passage from the Gospel of Mark which is full to overflowing with phrases and ideas which could keep us going in sermons for the rest of this year. But today I want to focus on just a few of those words, one small but important phrase – “whoever is not against us is for us.”

Here is the scene – the disciple, John, sees a person casting out demons (or exorcising a spirit, we might say) in the name of Jesus. John’s first reaction is to stop him, because he was not one of the known disciples of Jesus. When Jesus hears John’s report and responds it is a shock for John and the other disciples to hear what Jesus says. Far from commending the disciples for their reaction, Jesus’ response was of a different and unexpected nature. “Do not stop him!” Jesus says to his disciples, ‘for anyone who does a deed of power in my name will not then be able to speak evil about me. Whoever is not against us, is for us.’

Once again the disciples have got it all wrong and are shocked and bewildered by Jesus’ attitude towards, what the disciples considered, an intruder on to their turf.

What would have been our reaction if we had been there? I think that for most of us we would have been more likely to react in the way the disciples did then in the way Jesus did.

Let’s come at this from a slightly different perspective. If someone said to us ‘complete this well-known saying, “whoever is not” what would we say? I think that faced with that question our reaction and that of most people would be, “whoever is not with us is against us.” That is the most spontaneous response from most people.

“Whoever is not with us is against us” – all kinds of people have used that phrase in their speeches – Lenin, Mussolini, George Orwell and George W. Bush and even fellow Methodist, Hillary Clinton. And this same mind-set underlies so many of the conflicts we see in the world today. And it is this attitude of ‘them and us’ which underlies much of the reaction to the current migrant crisis in which people seeking refuge are seen not as people like us struggling to live a decent life but as people intent on swamping our culture, taking over our jobs and generally being a threat to our lives and future. They are seen as ‘other’ and therefore against us.

This same mind-set is employed in sport. Most of the time it is playful and just part of the game. So, we often say 'we are Arsenal fans here' and we are against Tottenham and especially Chelsea and most of the time this is just banter but we know that sometimes this spills over into hurtful words, insults thrown and even violence as happened at a recent Arsenal/Tottenham match.

Then, it cannot have escaped your notice, there is the Rugby World Cup. Most of us like to support the underdogs – except when they play and win against our team – as happened when the Japanese beat South Africa. Yesterday it was somewhat tense here at the Chapel as Leslie, Margaret and I tried to be on our best behaviour in the England/Wales match.

It seems as if human beings have it in their DNA to create in-groups and out-groups – those for us and those against us. It is something to do, I think, with boosting our own identity, seeking for our communal security and for strengthening the bonds that tie us together. It is also something almost primeval, from our past when it was a case of survival of the fittest and people needed to choose their friends and enemies carefully.

So the disciples' attitude to the incident related in our lesson is very understandable – here they saw someone casting out an evil spirit in the name of Jesus – and he was not one of the 12. "Who does he think he is?" you can imagine the disciples saying to one another. "How come he is using the name of Jesus? Jesus is our Rabbi our teacher – only we can use his name in that way" If the incident were to happen today there would be litigation concerned with branding and copyright.

If I think about I realise that if I were to come into Wesley's Chapel, into this sanctuary and find someone, strange and unknown, preaching from the pulpit or praying over people – here, in our space, my initial reaction would be just like that of the disciples. I would take the person on one side and say, "who are you?" "Who gave you permission to come in here and start to preach and pray?"

Jesus always shocked and surprised his disciples by his reactions. Jesus still has the power to shock us. "Whoever is not against us is for us." Whoever gives a cup of water to a person in need of a drink in the name of Christ is with us and will receive his or her reward.

Jesus' attitude was one of inclusiveness (except, interestingly, with the religious leaders of his day) not exclusiveness. He was embracing of others not rejecting of them. And it always got him into trouble with his listeners and especially with those 'in authority.'

Do you remember when he was thrown out of the synagogue and almost run out of town in his own place, Nazareth? He preached with authority in the synagogue and surprised everyone as he was known to be the son of Joseph, their local carpenter. But when he began to use 'outsiders' to the Jewish faith as examples of good and compassionate people, the locals got fed up and nearly chased him over the nearby cliff.

When the young lawyer asked Jesus for a definition of the 'neighbour' whom he should love, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan – not the priest or the Levite was the one who acted lovingly to the man who had been attacked on the Jericho Road yet it was the Samaritan who was the outsider, the hated 'other', with whom the Jews were supposed to have no dealings.

And then there was the longest theological discussion recorded in the Gospels with Jesus not talking to another Rabbi or a priest but to a woman of dubious reputation. This woman was so much of an outsider that she had to go to the well to draw water in the heat of the day when no-one else was around. Jesus talked to her with compassion about her life situation and about the idea of 'living water.' Here was a woman, living outside of normal society because of her lifestyle and history, with whom Jesus should have had no dealings at all, yet he spoke to her at length.

Tax collectors, women of dubious reputation, foreigners, and members of the hated Roman army - all of these came within the embrace of Jesus' concern. No wonder the 'religious' of the day grew to hate him.

Despite the example that Jesus gave the Early Church was riven with examples of division and separation. Throughout the letters of St Paul we see the struggle between the Christians of Jewish background and those from a Gentile background. By and large the Jews who became followers of Jesus – Christians – thought that they were the real Christians. They saw non-Jewish people, Gentiles, as 'other'. They tried to insist that only by becoming as Jews – accepting circumcision and the Jewish food laws, could Gentiles become 'proper' Christians and part of 'us'. And this tendency has persisted throughout the history of the Church and that is why we have so many denominations and groupings of Christians. Time and time again one group considered that they had the whole truth so that anyone who thought differently should be 'converted' or put beyond the bounds of fellowship – be excommunicated.

John Wesley, an Anglican priest, was thrown out of the Anglican Church because he did not respect Parish boundaries and went about preaching wherever he wished. He also did other dreadful things like preaching enthusiastically to ordinary labouring people out in the fields, at the mines and wherever people gathered. Wesley used the reading we have taken this morning to preach a sermon entitled 'A Caution against Bigotry.' He was trying to break people of the idea that any one group of people possessed the whole truth, such that they could deny any truth claims put forward by others. He called people who thought like that, 'bigots.'

Now is not the time to rehearse the whole of Wesley's sermon but let me give you a flavour of what he said.

"If I equate God's chosen people with membership in my church and dismiss the claims of all other churches, *I am a bigot.*"

"If I suggest my nation, right or wrong, is above reproach and refuse to find good in other peoples, *I am a bigot.*"

“If I believe that God has disclosed himself uniquely to people of my own faith group, my own religion, my own race, and deny his presence and activity in others, then *I am a bigot.*”

These were brave and bold words for someone living in the 18th century with memories of deep religious divisions and martyrdoms still in peoples' minds and with wars and rumours of wars all around in Europe.

Those were difficult times but we are also living in difficult times when some radicalised young Muslims seem ready to become suicide bombers or terrorists. Their activities, and the fear of those activities create panic and a sense of insecurity in our society and we tend to close ranks and strengthen our own group ghettos.

Jesus' words in our reading and John Wesley's words in his sermon caution us against such attitudes.

Yesterday we had a mixed Christian /Muslim marriage here and I urged the couple to live out their convictions and to stand against people who would seek to demonise one faith or the other and drive a wedge between them.

There is so much in the world around us that provokes us to an attitude of 'those who are not with us are against us' but we should never return evil for evil or bigotry for bigotry. Our default position, if we are to follow Jesus, should be the embrace of inclusivity and an attitude which maintains that 'those who are not against us are for us.'

Amen