

Sunday 30th September, 2018
The 19th Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

Esther 7:1-6,9-10; 9:20-22

Psalm 124

James 5:12-20

Mark 9:38-50

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Earlier in the week Reverend Rachel was speaking with the school children about choices - how James' letter, from which we have been reading these past few weeks, is all about making wise choices - decisions based on Godly wisdom, not the wisdom of the world. And she gave them a series of scenarios to which they had to respond - "was this a wise choice or a foolish choice"?

Of course, being children of that age, she realized quickly that she had to make the scenarios very specific. She couldn't just say - "you are playing outside. Is it wise or foolish to wear a hat"? One child said "what is the UV level?" Another asked whether they were playing under a sun shelter or not!! Although some of their questions were undoubtedly just for the sake of asking the questions, they did see the ambiguity within the situation, and wanted to be sure of their answers! Such wisdom in those so young...

Contrast this, then, with the apparent lack of wisdom or maturity of the disciples in the Gospel passage today. John comes to Jesus with the complaint that they had encountered someone casting out demons - but that they had stopped him, because he was not one of them - not following them. It seems as though the disciples were incapable of seeing anything other than black or white - they saw only the clear dichotomy between themselves - ministering and healing in Christ's name - and this other person, who was apparently not one of them.

It's a challenging scenario, isn't it. I wonder what the children would have made of it. I wonder whether they would have been so sure of what to do. I imagine that they would have wanted some more information - who was the healer following, if anyone? Was the demon actually exorcised? How was the person afterwards - were they healed?? So many questions, and yet the disciples saw only one thing - and they disagreed with it to the extent that they stopped the action.

Just pause and think about that for a moment. The disciples come across someone who, as they report to Jesus, was "casting out demons in your name." That is, they see someone who was relieving intense misery, following Jesus' example, and doing so in Jesus' name.

But none of that is enough. Why? "Because he was not following us." Notice the shift in pronouns. This other exorcist is doing works of power in "your name," but "not following us." And there it is - the nub of the issue.

Apparently, for the disciples, it is not enough to be a follower of Jesus; you have to be a *certain kind* of follower. One that toes the line, that shares their theological commitments, that conforms to the disciples' expectations, perhaps that is therefore under the oversight or control of the disciples.

It's interesting to me that John, the disciple making the report, seems to expect Jesus' approval. He is not asking a question, "should we have stopped him?" But rather offers an almost matter-of-fact account: "And we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

Far from giving his stamp of approval, however, Jesus corrects John and the others: "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. Whoever is not against us is for us." It's almost as if the disciples don't realize how significant or challenging their mission is, and Jesus admonishes them to find and accept help wherever they can.

But then he goes further, saying: “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.” Notice what a small, even paltry example Jesus uses. In a mere sentence or two, Jesus has gone from talking about “deeds of power” to “giving someone a cup of water.” Strikingly, that small gesture alone, according to Jesus, is enough to secure one’s reward.

Scholars tend to agree that Mark is re-telling this scene from Jesus’ ministry in order to help deal with some of the internal conflicts with which his own community was struggling. We don’t know quite what the dividing lines were -just that there were significant divisions. And so Mark invites his diverse and conflicted congregation into Jesus’ story in order to reframe how they think about their lives, their commitments, their identity, and their vision of what constitutes authentic Christian community.

As I read this passage in light of the stark polarization of our times, I’m not sure very much has changed. Because it only takes the briefest of glances to notice that the church has not escaped this polarization but rather has allowed itself to be defined almost entirely by the terms of the current political climate. Christian leaders on the left and right - notice how hard it is to even have this conversation without using labels from the political context? - set the standards of what they believe constitutes genuine faith.

And within the Anglican church at this time, there seems to be this very clear distinction - “we are the people being faithful to the history of the Anglican Church”, say those who feel as though they are right. “We are the ones who are interpreting the sacred Scriptures for our time”, say those that are sure that *they* are right. And what is the outcome? Fragmented witness; faltering ministry; evangelism that seems to say “follow us, we are the ones who are right”, rather than what we should be saying - “follow Jesus - give your life to him.”

In the early Church, Tertullian tells us that pagans were struck by the witness of Christian love. “See how they love one another!” they would remark. I wonder how many people would look at us today and say the same.

And yet, Jesus says this precisely today - a cup of water to the one in need. This is our outward sign of love. This is the way in which we show people that we are following Jesus - that we are disciples. Not by our clever words or by our theological acumen - not even by our prayers - but by our visible and tangible love for those around us.

“Be salty”, Jesus says - be the person who, by their life and actions, adds flavor and meaning and purpose to the lives of others. And recognize that there will be others who have different gifts, different callings, and they will also be salty, so that more and more people can be reached.

Elsewhere, Jesus says that the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Instead of worrying about the other labourers, and whether they believe the same as us, let us be bearers of kindness and love and mercy, as we seek to be faithful to Christ, bringing a cup of water to those in need...

In the name of God. Amen