

Rev Warren Deason, guest preacher at St Andrews 30 September 2018

38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us."

39 But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me.

40 For he that is not against us is for us.

41 For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward.

42 "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea.

43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

44

45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell.

46

47 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell,

48 where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.

49 For every one will be salted with fire.

50 Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

(Mark 9:38-50, RSV).

A group of soldiers in wartime France sought to find a burial place for their dead comrade. They found a village with a small churchyard cemetery and approached the local priest to ask whether the body of their friend could be interred there. The priest asked whether their friend was a Catholic – they said as far as they knew he was a good man but had no religious belief. The priest shrugged and sadly told them that he could not bury their friend in consecrated ground – they would have to inter him outside the fence of the graveyard.

Some months later the group returned to pay their respects to their dead comrade – but they could not find his grave. They sought out the local priest who told them that he felt remorse about his decision and now their friend was buried within the church graveyard.

"So did you dig up the body and rebury our friend?" they asked.

"No", the priest replied, " I simply moved the fence!"

Pauli Murray, a black civil rights activist once wrote: "When my brothers try to draw a circle to exclude me, I shall draw a larger circle to include them."

I think those stories provides a suitable way of connecting to today's gospel. Once again we have the closest of Jesus' friends misunderstanding some fundamental truths about the heart of his mission.

The disciples tell him of an exorcist who using the name of Jesus, is able to free people from demonic oppression. However the disciples are irritated that the man has no links to their group.

Jesus however rebuffs their concerns with the words,

*"Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is for us."*

This is a remarkably inclusive and generous response from Jesus.

"For he that is not against us is for us."

In answer to the disciples' desire to exclude this man – Jesus redraws the boundary lines to include him.

As I reread this story I felt that Jesus offers a very helpful model for us to ponder in relation to our attitude to others, God and ourselves.

Rather than talk about our making judgements about who is in or out, included or excluded in a very black and white way, we can recognise that the life of God is already at work in every human life and our role is for us to acknowledge that and help discern what our responses to that should be. We are to draw attention to that, and encourage that life to blossom and grow rather than be imprisoned, ignored or smothered. To help both ourselves and others pay attention to this presence and its invitations and challenges.

A man visiting a cattle ranch in the outback of Australia was puzzled that in this vast sprawling spread there was no sign of a fence. When he raised the issue with the farmer he received the reply, " There's really no problem, we find it's far more effective to build wells rather than construct endless miles of fencing to keep the cattle in."

However it seems to me that the church so often would rather build miles of doctrinal fencing to keep the faithful in line. A good example of this is our church's so-called contemporary confession of faith: *Kupu Whakapono*, which was was

finally approved after years off doctrinal wrangling. It's a confession of some 263 words which then has a commentary of some 11,500 words to ensure we all understand it in the same way! This seems to me too be a diminishing of grace and a narrowing of the church's theological arteries. Drawing smaller and smaller circles.

If Jesus ' goal and those of us who follow him is expressed in the words of the Lord's Prayer,

"Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,"

So rather than seeing the primary purpose of our faith as "converting" others to our point of view, we are to follow the way of Jesus whose purpose was, 'the kingdom of God"

So then the focus shifts from the triumph of the church as the end, to the growth of the kingdom – God's dream for creation, where we do justice, love mercy and walk in humility with God. So that means can we celebrate every advance and expression of true justice, compassion and peace in our world – every good and kindly and noble act done (in whatever name) for ultimately all good has its source in God.

So this asks of us a sensitivity and a willingness to be generous and inclusive.

For me there is also this notion of not obstructing or getting in the way of what God seeks to do by imposing narrow categories or ideas upon others.

So many people have become the victims of those who abuse and misunderstand the nature of authority in the gospel – This is the third story in a row where Jesus has turn our notions of power and authority on their head – He had to tell them that their notion of power as triumphal was misguided, his was the power of suffering love and service. Then he challenged the idea of power as dominance – and asked us to see things from the point of view of the vulnerable – he put a child in their midst.

And now power becomes, not the authority to exclude and say who is or who is out, but the grace to include and embrace and recognise the presence of God in the least expected of places.

So we ought to give ourselves more breathing space, more room to move.

An illustration of this might be the OT struggle between the prophet and the priest. The priest is the authorised authority and authority; he has the credentials given to him by the system. His authority is institutional - he builds or at least maintains the fences.

Prophets are freelance. Their authority is inspirational (drawn from the well). They often work outside the system and are often critical of it.

I think there is a struggle between the prophet and priest in us – on the one hand, our desire to conform to the rules of the system- our fear of stepping outside the boundaries or moving outside the fences. Part of it may come from our love and respect for the traditions we have received.

But on the other hand I think we need to give more space to the more adventurous prophet who is willing to be critical and more daring, willing to swim outside the flags. Who is not content with second-hand faith but is more concerned with the presence of God in the here and now.

Give others more breathing space.

If we are willing to recognise that God can work outside our authorised versions of faith or outside our group – we can be less judgemental and more generous and accepting of the diversity of faith in others – encouraging and affirming that which is life-giving and liberating.

In that beautiful contemporary NZ hymn *O Threefold God*, we have the words, “Where(ever) love is born or people reconciled, we share your life O Parent, Spirit, Child.”

The man casting out demons in the gospel story was obviously seen as a threat, perhaps to the disciple’s ego.

Recognise too that the appreciation of others need not be a threat to our ego. (cf with the disciples' reaction to the exorcist , who maybe had quite a following.) I've recognised in myself that feeling of resentment sometimes at another's success or their being given praise. I need to hear, that recognition of another does not in any way diminish me. (As a retired minister there's only one thing worse than being told that things are not going well in the parish you left and that's being told that they are going better than ever!) My identity does not depend on being successful or even "right", I find my true identity, in Henri Nouwen's wonderful phrase, in being "the beloved" of God. Grace is so much bigger than the needs of my fragile ego.

Finally, give God more breathing space.

God's life and love and Spirit will run outside the channels we set and the canals we build. We ought to celebrate it and acknowledge that one way or another God will be who God will be and that rather than being a threat is good news.

I began the service with the bookend of a story and now I conclude this reflection with the bookend of a verse from James K Baxter's well known, *Song to the Holy Spirit*.

Lord, Holy Spirit

You blow like the wind in a thousand paddocks

Inside and outside the fences

You blow where you wish to blow