

## SERMON: Sunday – 26 September 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper

### Whoever is not against us is for us

**James 5:13-20**

**Mark 9:38-50**

#### SLIDE

“Whoever is not against us is for us.” What an amazing declaration. In other words, what Jesus is saying is whoever doesn’t oppose the beautiful and saving works of God — mercy, love, kindness, justice, liberation, peacemaking, healing, nurturing — is on Jesus’s side, and our work is to welcome them, host them, include them, and love them.

#### SLIDE

Our job is not to keep them out.

Today’s Gospel reading had the disciples policing the gates of the kingdom and excluding outsiders because they were not part of the inside group, the real followers of Jesus.

#### SLIDE

“We told him to stop because he isn’t one of our group” (Mark 9:38 NLT).

For John and the disciples it wasn’t enough that this outsider was driving out demons in Jesus’ name. He or she needed to be more than that. They needed to be part of the inner circle.

**38** ‘Teacher,’ said John, ‘we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.’

**39** ‘Do not stop him,’ Jesus said. ‘For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, **40** for whoever is not against us is for us. **41** Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.’

It’s a story that has a direct parallel in the Torah, in the book of Numbers chapter 11.

The people are grumbling and Moses can’t take it any longer. He’s at the end of his tether and he tells God he’s had enough.

Sometimes we need to lament like Moses yet who of us is bold enough to go there?

God in his graciousness, instructs Moses to gather together 70 elders to help him. And the Lord promises to take some of the spirit in Moses and give it to the elders as they gather at the Tent of Meeting.

#### SLIDE

26 However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. 27 A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."

28 Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' aide since youth, spoke up and said, "Moses, my lord, stop them!"

29 But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!"  
(Numbers 11)

Moses doesn't say what Jesus said, but the spirit is the same - O that all would be filled - and those who are not against us are for us.

It seems, as one commentator pointed out, that God has to spend a lot of time throwing open the doors we run around closing. How ironic that we feel more zealous about the borders of God's kingdom than God does! (Debbie Thomas).

Why is it that we human beings find such satisfaction in fancying ourselves as God's bouncers? Why do we Christians place so many stumbling blocks in the paths of those who seek God in ways we don't immediately recognise? Why are we so much better at noticing and judging differences than we are at seeing and celebrating commonalities?

We exclude. We judge. We condemn. We compare. But the truth is, we are called to be God's generous and welcoming hosts. Hosts who throw the doors of the kingdom wide open. Hosts who understand that there's enough divine goodness, mercy, and justice to go around. Hosts who trust that God can handle our diversity — and delight in it as well. Hosts who respond with joy and gratitude whenever "deeds of power" are done in Jesus's name. Hosts who, like Moses, long for the day when "all the Lord's people" will be filled to overflowing with the spirit of God.

#### [SLIDE

The singer, Elton John, said in a newspaper article last year: "The failure of many churches to welcome, accept and include LGBTQ+ people creates stigma, loneliness, fear and denial, causing lasting damage to their wellbeing and mental health. Churches must be safe and affirming."]

Faith is fragile. It can be easily lost or broken. I think this is why Mark has Jesus using the diminutive form of the Greek word for child - these little ones - when speaking of the relationship with faith seekers.

Jesus warns his disciples not to cause little ones to stumble.

SLIDE

What are the stumbling blocks that we might put in the way of people on the journey of faith?

It might be the rules we put in place.

It might be our lack of welcome to others.

It might be our refusal to include outsiders.

I regularly come across people who have been slighted by the church. How a previous minister has refused to baptise their child because they were not members of the church, or refused to marry her and her partner in the church building because they had already been living together before they were married.

These are 2 real examples that I have heard in the last year.

Let's not make it hard for people to encounter the reign of God. Let's make it easy.

And if we're finding it hard we may need to examine the things we do with our hands, the places we go with our feet and the way we look at things with our eyes.

Is this why Jesus says it's better to enter life with only one hand, one foot or one eye than miss out on the flow of God whilst keeping both limbs to ourselves?

Might we need to give up something in order to avoid causing little ones to stumble? Might we need to set aside opinions and embrace tolerance in the interests of peace?

I think we might. I think we need to go out of our way, in this day and age, to assure people that God loves them and welcomes them and does not judge them. It sounds to me like what Jesus did.

What might that look like today I wonder?

Sam Wells recently wrote, "If you're looking for where the future church is coming from, look at what the church and society has so blithely rejected. The

life of the church is about constantly recognising the sin of how much we have rejected, and celebrating the grace that God gives us back what we once rejected to become the cornerstone of our lives.”

Let us pray

God of infinite and unfailing love,

Forgive us for the times we've prevented ourselves and other people from discovering your boundless grace and mercy.

Show us the way, the way to open up your reign to more and more of the people you already love and have forgiven.

In Jesus name. Amen.