

## Sermon by Rev David Thiem

Pentecost 18 – Wesley Uniting 10.30am – 27<sup>th</sup> September 2015

Theme: “Inclusive or exclusive”

Reading: Mark 9:38-50

Text: Jesus said to John, “No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us.” Mark 9: 39/40

### Introduction

Last Sunday’s Gospel had the disciples talking about “Who is the greatest?” as they journeyed to Jerusalem. Jesus challenged the disciples on this and then took a little child in his arms and said,

“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not (simply) welcome me but the one who sent me.” Mark 9:37

A child in Jesus’ day was seen as initially worthless as many would die. It was only when they were grown up that they had worth, could work or fight and were of use to society then. Hence a child had no power, no social status, and was seen as a burden at that stage of their life. Yet to Jesus he teaches that the inclusiveness of God is for all. Those with no power are also part of God’s kingdom and should be treated as such. A different way of looking at the world for Jesus’ time.

It is in this context that we have the reading from Mark for today which is in two parts:

Mark 9:38-41 ‘Those included in the Kingdom’

Mark 9:42-50 ‘Those excluded from the Kingdom.’

Not necessarily an easy passage for us to encounter but one that is still pertinent today, so let us take a closer look at it and unravel its relevance.

### Discussion

We have seen power politics at play over these past few weeks. The making of a new Prime Minister and the demise of a former one. The rise of new ministers and the fall of others. What we haven’t seen is compassion for those behind the scenes, those left looking for new jobs, those adversely affected by the initial changes within the parliament and those left wondering what all this means. The ‘fall-out’ is still happening and will continue for some time.

1. While the aforementioned is not specific to the Gospel for today there is a parallel in the first section of the reading from Mark.

“Teacher,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” Vs 38

How confronting!! Here John says to Jesus – “We are exclusive, aren’t we?” “We need to keep a rein on what is happening and not let others challenge us or our authority!!

This man is NOT one of us”

This exclusiveness can be seen in the church today, in our language, our practices, our wanting to, ‘in a sense’ control the work of God and not let others in.

Jesus' response is not to encourage this exclusiveness but to encourage inclusiveness. John was chastised, quietly, by Jesus.

“Do not stop him. No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us.”  
Vss 39/40

Amazing teaching for those times when you had so many groups vying for the same crowd and the power of a name was so important. Jesus' name needed to be trademarked, but here Jesus says, no need for that – this man is of God. It is fine if he uses my name.

Then Jesus goes on to say: “I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose their reward.” Vs 41

This reference to the person who gives a drink of water to a disciple on the grounds that he or she belongs to Jesus concretely illustrates the principle of vs 40 and indicates how wide is the range of participation in the mission which Jesus envisions. Suddenly the mission moves beyond the inner circle of disciples and moves outwards, like a stone thrown into a pond – the ripples move well beyond the centre of impact affecting a much larger area – impinging on the lives of those far beyond the disciples. Great teaching for us today as we look at our lives, our ministry in the name of Christ and how we may impact on others positively for Christ. Often we will not even know that we have impacted positively on the faith of others. Nor should we necessarily know. However the challenge is to stay faithful Christ and Christ's teaching.

2. Now comes the harder part of Jesus' teaching to the disciples and to us. This second section in today's Gospel from Mark 9:42-50 speaks of what causes people to be excluded from the Kingdom of God. Jesus begins this section with the words:

“And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.” Vs42

The 'little ones' can be both a reference to the children in Mark 9:37 but may also include those who are beginning to journey with Jesus but have only a little faith and could easily 'fall away' if not encouraged. Here we have a challenge for us today, to be encouragers of not only the children and young people among us but also to those who are young in their journey of faith with Jesus.

Looking at this passage in this way suddenly makes it alive for us and possibly it asks the rhetorical question, “What are we doing to share our faith; are we offering the cup of water to others, in the name of Christ?” Unsettling isn't it as we personalise the Scripture for ourselves.

The language becomes more grizzly and grotesque as Jesus makes the point in vss43-48 that if parts of the body offend, then they need to be cast off. For the literalists, this section would be difficult to cope with. However, the point made here is a call by Jesus for concrete obedience which renews the radical demands of discipleship. Second best, is not good enough for God – we are called to give of our best.

In verse 49 brings a slight change in direction occurs:

“Everyone will be salted with fire.”

This verse talks about being tested in a hostile world and seeing who is true to God. In the Old Testament, part of your offering to God was that as you brought your offering, for example a lamb, a dove or a goat, along with it was also an offering of salt.

The salt-sacrifice metaphor is appropriate to a situation of suffering and trial in which the principle of sacrifice cultivated with respect to the individual members of the body is now severely tested. The disciples must be seasoned with the salt, like the sacrifice. They will experience fiery trials and some commentators have suggested that Jesus is fore-telling of the persecutions of the early Christians under Nero's reign that would occur within 20-30 years of his death.

The final verse talks about keeping your saltiness, literally your faith, even under circumstances where faith is tested. Once you lose your saltiness it is nigh impossible to get it back!

Hence a warning to the disciples and to us today is found here. As background to this saying of Jesus, Pliny the Elder had already recorded that salt from the Dead Sea can lose its savoury quality and become insipid. Jesus' words presuppose this truth.

Hence the saltiness of your faith is a distinctive mark of your faith and you need this salt-like quality to be at peace with yourself and with one another.

What is to set people apart from one another is not distinctions of rank, title, power or worth, but literally the quality of their 'saltiness' – that is their discipleship and faithfulness to Christ as Lord and Saviour. There is lot for us to think about in just a few verses.

### Summary

One story I read while preparing this sermon is a fitting summary of the inclusiveness of our faith – being open for all.

I quote, from a source unknown:

'It's interesting that our New Testament was mostly written in Greek. One might have thought Hebrew. However, it's fascinating that we don't require people to learn Hebrew or Greek in order to be baptized or confirmed to be part of the church. Our scriptures, virtually from the first, were busily translated into other languages as a testimonial to the Christian faith's refusal to be bound by nation, race or speech.'

Today we are reminded about inclusiveness not exclusiveness as the way of Christ. We need to continue to look for ways to be open, to reach out to others, so that our Christian faith remains an inclusive faith, open to all.

Praise be to God for the Word for this day. Amen.