

Sunday Homily

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

26 SEPTEMBER 2021

YEAR B

“Whoever is not against us is for us.”

Mark 9:40

Illustration

One familiar theme in many great stories throughout literary history is that of the impossibility of loving, or even giving credibility to, someone who does not belong to your group. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*, its modern interpretation in musical form, are good examples. Problems often arise when people look beyond their own immediate circle of family and friendship allegiances towards those who do not seem to fit.

The intentions of the person reaching out may be of the best. Their minds, unencumbered by the limitations set upon them by their particular tradition, may have become broadened by experience and developed a greater tolerance than their peers. It takes a boldness and courage to step outside acceptable norms. It can take a grand passion (like *Romeo and Juliet*) or great faith to impel us into such risky behaviour. But this course can provoke such fear and anxiety in those around that the likely outcome can range from our own exclusion from the group to violence and even death for one or more participants. Conventional wisdom tells us to stick to our own.

Fortunately for us, Jesus and his disciples and the saints who followed them were foolhardy and trusting, and anything but conventional.

Gospel Teaching

The disciples had tried to stop someone from casting out devils in Jesus’ name because “he’s not one of us”. John obviously expected Jesus to be pleased with them for doing this. Why should he derive credit for miracles which were the work of Jesus and his particular disciples? Surely, he must be prevented, for everyone’s protection? As we know, without any hesitation, Jesus went against this conventional wisdom. It does not matter to him that the man was not a part of his immediate followers. His overriding concern always was that good should be done, whenever and wherever possible. If this was being credited to his power, which was really God’s power, then no harm would be done and evil would have found another enemy.

Jesus stresses the importance of each of us deciding on whose side we are prepared to stand and fight, and what we are willing to defend. But he also asks

us to think about who will suffer for it. God will never ask us to sacrifice the “little ones”, Jesus says. If we are defending our “in-group” at the cost of the vulnerable, we are not working with Jesus. Over and above this there are no restrictions upon the good actions of anyone. God’s kingdom is not a club requiring membership fees, but the free gift of the Father to all his children. There is only one rule in God’s kingdom, that of love. When it permeates our whole being, dedication to God becomes the central driving force of our life and the pivot upon which turns our hope of eternal joy to come.

Application

If we are open to the Spirit of God and recognise the existence of the Spirit within others, then we will rejoice to find God’s work being done, no matter where it is happening and who is conducting it. It is very tempting to allow ourselves to believe that we belong to a privileged “in-group”. This, after all, can give us a sense of identity, a belief in our self-worth. But we have long passed the time when membership of a particular denomination was seen as the only passport to heaven, to the exclusion of everyone else.

We now know that God’s truth is found everywhere, amongst all peoples. Even among those who claim not to know God, we find God at work. The Spirit does not need permission to flood the heart with good intentions. In our fight against evil in its many forms, in the struggle to free people from slavery, from injustice and poverty the important question is not “Are they one of us?” but “Are they doing God’s work and can we help?”

Today, the Gospel reiterates the vital question. Do we truly desire to dedicate ourselves to God’s will and God’s work? If so, let us rejoice that those who take up the challenge are so infinitely varied and sometimes unexpected. Our God of great surprises calls each by name, and the Spirit we share and which draws us into unity is one for all time.