

## **Sermon for 29<sup>th</sup> September 2024, Year B, Proper 21**

**Preached at St John Baillieston**

**Mark 9:38-end**

### **Sermon**

Today's gospel reading from Mark – and the Old Testament reading from the book of Numbers – both address the situation where certain people not in the inner circle are taking it on themselves to do ministry without 'proper authority'.

In Numbers, God has summoned seventy of the elders of Israel to the tent of meeting, where he placed his Spirit on them, causing them to prophesy. Two of the elders didn't show up to the meeting but they received God's Spirit anyway and started prophesying back in the camp. This caused great offence for Moses' assistant Joshua. Perhaps he was annoyed that those who hadn't showed up to the meeting had received God's gift anyway – or perhaps he thought they were undermining Moses' authority by taking a leadership role in the camp while all the other elders had followed God's instructions and gone to the tent.

Joshua immediately wants to defend Moses' honour and demands that 'they must be stopped!' Moses, however, has no interest in this. Instead, he says he wishes that everyone had received God's spirit and was prophesying just as these two men were doing.

What we see in Numbers is a spiritual leader who wants everyone to experience God's Spirit and be enthusiastic about sharing that with one another, while his assistant wants to keep such gifts just for the small group who can be trusted to be on-message and obedient, and not implicitly challenge the leader's authority.

A similar situation apparently happened in New York after the 9/11 attacks. At an outdoor service, prayers were offered by religious leaders from many

different traditions. One Christian group, however, started a movement to depose one of their own participating bishops because by participating they said he had erroneously recognised the 'legitimacy' of the prayers of other groups!

The trouble is that the Holy Spirit is almost never on-message and obedient from a human perspective. Whenever human leaders try to set strict doctrinal boundaries about who belongs and who's an outcast, the Holy Spirit is invariably spending more time with the outsiders, transforming their lives while the insiders are still sitting around arguing about their rules.

The same sort of situation appears in our Gospel reading. The disciple John, who clearly likes to think of himself as an important leader among Jesus' followers, comes to Jesus complaining that someone has been casting out demons in Jesus' name. He assumes that Jesus would want them stopped as they weren't part of his group and weren't acting under his authority.

It's a fairly typical human reaction in a hierarchical culture. You join a group, you submit to following their rules, and you gradually gain influence and respect within the group as a result. But then how do you feel when some 'Johnny-come-lately' arrives and immediately asserts themselves as a leader and makes themselves important when they haven't properly served their time?

This happened to me quite a lot when I worked in London. After several years working for an investment bank, I was given the opportunity for a promotion if I could hire someone to do my current role. I duly hired an excellent candidate ten years my junior, and trained them up, only for them to quickly schmooze their way into a role even more senior than the one I was being promoted to!

Most people will thoroughly resent this, and I certainly did, until I came to realise that the rules I was judging people for not obeying, were rules I had simply imposed on myself.

But many organisations do impose their hierarchies very rigidly. No Christian denomination is happy for someone to randomly declare themselves a minister and set up a church without proper authorisation and certification, requiring a discernment and selection period, followed by several years of study and then even more years of on-the-job training. I first offered myself to do this role in 2010, and it wasn't until twelve years later in 2022 that I finally became a vicar in the Church of England. I gave the entirety of my 40s to training and preparing for this work.

So how would I feel if someone woke up one morning and decided to start a church down the street based solely on some sense that God was calling them to do that? What if it were terrifically successful? Would I be glad? Or annoyed? Would I respond like John and Joshua, or like Jesus and Moses?

Jesus and Moses are both clear that when it comes to inclusion in God's family, the human temptation to ringfence ourselves, and include only those who are prepared to obey all our rules and become like us, is not at all what God wants.

Throughout the Bible we see repeatedly that God doesn't pay much attention to the various human organisations that have been set up to provide structure and hierarchy in religion. Jesus himself is constantly at loggerheads with the Pharisees and Sadducees, not because he disagrees with their theology, but because they reject people who haven't submitted to their authority. Even after the Resurrection, apostles like Peter are still shocked to discover that the Holy Spirit is coming into the hearts and lives of non-Jews before the early Christian church can even reach them with their full message. How confusing it must have been for the apostles that sinners were somehow receiving the Holy Spirit even before they had been taught and baptised and squished and sanctified into the proper mould.

This is why, in the Gospel reading, Jesus immediately moves from ensuring the man casting out demons in his name isn't stopped, to then emphasising how

wicked it would be to put a stumbling block in front of the 'little ones' who believe in him.

The 'little ones' in this case are not primarily referring to children, but to those who have only recently come to faith, perhaps including this man the disciples are complaining about. Don't put stumbling blocks in the way of recent converts, Jesus is saying. Don't immediately try to squeeze them into your model of what it means to be a proper Christian. The Holy Spirit might have some quite different ideas, and you wouldn't want to stand in her way.

Jesus is so forceful on this that he says it would literally be better for someone to die rather than ruin someone's new faith by insisting they were doing it wrong. In Matthew's Gospel he says this: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." When Jesus is that harsh, he must feel it's pretty important.

It's not that organisations are wrong and bad, and personal experience is all that matters. Sometimes the over-enthusiastic go-getter does need to be given some guard-rails to prevent them leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. This is why monks and nuns make vows of obedience to a superior for example.

What I do take from these passages, however, is a warning to all of us in religious organisations not to dismiss what the Holy Spirit is doing elsewhere. Just because someone doesn't look like us or can't hold to our creed or appreciate our liturgy, it doesn't mean that they haven't also encountered the same God in a deeply loving way. Perhaps we have as much to learn from them, as they from us. I think our response should be like Moses: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"