

SERMON for Pentecost 19 – September 29th, 2024.

Readings: Numbers 11: 4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Psalm 19: 7-14; James 5: 12-20; Mark 9: 38-50.

One of the thoughts which jumped out at me from our readings today is “Unity in Diversity” and the call to faithfulness. This seems particularly relevant this year as I returned from the annual diocesan Synod yesterday evening! There is certainly diversity in thought in our diocese but praise God that we have learnt about respectful debating over the last 2 years!

Looking at our readings, they seemed to highlight the importance of community, especially on our faith journey and more particularly how we interact with each other and with God.

In both the Old Testament and Gospel readings we have someone upset about someone outside the fold doing something good or God-given. The curse of jealousy, which can mar the fruit of generosity and kindness.

In the reading from Numbers, we hear the Israelites having another grumble and whinge - this time about being fed up with the God-given provision of quails and manna and rather idealising the food they had in Egypt – as slaves!

Moses calls the seventy elders to the Tent of Meeting so they could be blessed with a portion of Moses’ spirit, with the result that they were able to prophesy. All but two obeyed, but when it was later discovered that the two who disobeyed had also been blessed, Joshua, Moses’ 2iC, protested.

Moses’ response would echo Jesus’ millennia later: “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” [Numbers 11:29]

This passage highlights a common human tendency to idealise the past, especially during difficult times. There is nothing better and more comforting to talk about ‘the good old days’, even when in reality they weren’t necessarily that ‘good’. It is easy to fall into the trap of conveniently forgetting just how hard the past really was, and how we have taken for granted the more modern accommodations which surround us ... even if we do romanticise the lack of communications of yesteryear!

We complain that this generation are ruled by their phones and other technology and yet recently we have seen how someone working alone, in an isolated place, was able to call for help after having an accident which probably saved their life or at least further injury.

I wonder if we are ever jealous of others’ seeming successes. I wonder what sources of spiritual nourishment and faith development we ignore or gloss over because it is different to what we are comfortable with?

In the Gospel this morning, Jesus is attempting to have some teaching time with his disciples, and as usual they still didn’t “get it”. He had been trying to help them to understand his purpose and what was to happen once they got to Jerusalem, but as we heard last week, all they had done on the way to their house in Capernaum was to argue about who was the greatest, and now they were complaining about someone healing in Jesus’ name, who wasn’t part of their inner circle.

Jesus’ response is to address these issues of exclusion and encourages them, and us, to be welcoming and hospitable to those beyond our usual groups. Generally, humankind forms groups of “people like us”, those who have common interests and values and it is often a challenge to welcome people who are “different” into our inner circle.

The disciple John’s complaint is a similar conversation to the one between Moses and Joshua. Jesus’ response “Whoever is not against us is for us” is not far away from the motivation of “Are you jealous for my sake?” Jealousy is a curse. True discipleship is marked by humility and openness. We are called to celebrate God’s work in others, even if they don’t fit our mold.

I remember some years ago, Bono, who is the lead singer of the Irish rock band U2, was in the news for things other than his singing. He was traveling around the world, visiting with world leaders about the twin crises of AIDS and crushing national debt in many of the countries in Africa. He called especially on American and European Christians to work hard to find solutions to these crises.

The important thing to know about Bono is that he’s a Christian, and this activism is a ministry he believes God had called him to do. He has the time, and the money, and his fame means people will listen to him where others might not be heard.

Unfortunately, some fellow Christians rejected Bono's message. They said, "He doesn't attend church regularly, he isn't part of a regular community of faith that worships together every Sunday. He doesn't show enough respect for our churches, our leaders; and he's politically liberal, which we don't think is appropriate for Christians. So how dare he judge us, judge how we live our faith, tell us that we have responsibilities to all those people in Africa who may or may not even be Christians?"

"Teacher, we saw a man speaking out for poor and sick Africans in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."¹

Over the last several weeks our Epistle readings have come from the Letter of James, and today we have the final instalment. James' letter has given us plenty of pointers to living a righteous life.

Faith without works is dead, says James. Today we hear more good advice:

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. [James 5: 13-16]

We have a very faithful prayer circle in this parish, but it is incumbent on all of us to pray for each other, treat each other with respect, be helpful rather than put what Jesus would call a 'stumbling block' in another's path. We are called not to gossip, not to be rude and definitely not be envious about what someone else has or is doing in the name of Christ. We are called to use our words wisely, for them to build up another rather than tear them down.

One of the most profound understandings which I have come to in my journey of faith is that I am a beloved child of God, most precious in God's sight. But that is not just me, it is all of us, every one of us is a beloved child of God, however we worship, whatever our relationship with God currently looks like.

There is the old saying that goes: "my life is God's gift to me, how I live my life is my gift to God". It *is* how we live our lives, how we live out that "belovedness" which is the greatest witness to the world of our faith.

That is the choice we have to make and in part it is our responsibility to support and nurture others around us and beyond – the chaplains in our schools, prisons and workplaces, the Bonos of the world who use their celebrity status to reach the worlds' leaders, to how we try to make a difference.

The middle section of our gospel is Jesus' using 'hyperbole', perhaps continued frustration at his disciples' lack of understanding but perhaps too, a warning to all who claim to be Christ-followers but go against Jesus' teaching particularly in the care of "these little ones". We don't need to cut off our hands or legs or poke our eyes out. But we need to be aware of what causes us to sin either by deed or omission and to distance ourselves from it.

Let us celebrate our diversity but cherish our unity in Christ.

We are to be salt – to enhance and preserve – and to be at peace with one another – in love and in service. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

1. The example of Bono - Revd Sharla Hulsey from a sermon in 2003.