

**ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH**  
**SUNDAY 27 SEPTEMBER 2009**  
**Mr Robert Sanderson**  
**Numbers 11: 25-29; Mark 9: 38-41**

**"Taking a Stand"**

*"Whoever is not against us is for us."*

**1. INCLUSIVE vs. EXCLUSIVE THINKING**

Today's readings are all about leadership...

Mark tells this story:

John complains to Jesus that they caught someone who wasn't a follower exorcising in Jesus' name. Jesus replies that that's a good thing because that person would hardly turn around later and say bad things about him. Then we get these words from Jesus, *"Whoever is not against us is for us."* And he goes on to say that anyone who gives you a drink because you're one of us will have their reward.

Most people today would have a problem with the whole issue of demons and exorcism. We could generalize it and regard this as a healing story, but it is far more potent for us when it is interpreted metaphorically. Jesus liberates a person from whatever enslaves them and gives their life back to them. This fits well with the reflexive ending where he talks about others giving them a drink of water – the sustainer of life. Reading the story this way makes it about exercising the power of love to liberate others from their chains. And anyone who does that is accepted by Jesus, whether they are his followers or not. (You might like to compare the similarity of this story with that in Numbers which is about Moses and the 70 elders. I will leave you to think about that.)

Before we continue, it is important to investigate this saying a little further.

There are two different versions of this saying in the synoptic Gospels.

Mark says: *"Whoever is not against us is for us."* (Mark 9:40)

Luke says: *"Whoever is not against you is for you."* (Luke: 9:50)

These are inclusive.

Both Matthew AND Luke say:

*"Whoever is not with me is against me."* (Matt 12:30 and Luke 11:23)

This is the exact opposite and is exclusive. (Everyone else is against me.)

Mark's story was the original known by Matthew and Luke and his inclusive saying paints Jesus as the one who is welcoming of others. Indeed, there is a very clear statement that those who express compassion and loving kindness towards others do not have to be members of the Jesus' community

to do God's work.

Matthew's community was facing a very different situation facing internal disputes and it resisted diversity. As usually happens in this situation there is a move towards dogmatism with its inevitable intolerance and exclusion. It was this model that would become entrenched in the Christian church as it became inseparable from the power structures of the state under Constantine.

I have often been struck by the occasions when this expression, "*Whoever is not with me is against me.*", is used. It is always in a situation of a perceived threat, of fear. This reaction is completely understandable. It is "natural" – and by that I mean "innate". It is part of the self-preservation reaction so important to our evolutionary survival. The trouble is that it quickly becomes the language of aggression which then invokes (or provokes) the same result in others. The question is not whether the language used is wrong; it is whether it is appropriate.

Have you ever heard anyone quote our text for the day, "*Whoever is not against us is for us.*"? I haven't.

Mark wants us to think about this. This saying is so close to our ordinary lives that we don't even think about it. If we move it around a bit it is really saying "Accept everyone unless you have cause to think otherwise". That's a pretty practical approach.

The difference between these two ways of thinking cannot be ignored. There is a 'closed' way of doing things which is all about us. And there is an 'open' way of doing things which is about the other. Closed thinking is always about what we want to preserve. Open thinking is about being open to change – which, after all, is how we grow. That does not mean that there are not many things that need to be preserved.

Closed communities are intimately tied to power structures. Where we have a dominant religion, culture or group linked to the society's power structures, then they tend to be less tolerant towards those other ones without power.

All we know about Jesus points to his living the 'open' way. There is overwhelming evidence that Jesus stood up for the poor, the weak, the powerless, the sick and the suffering. He stood up against the powers, be they religious or secular, that caused or maintained this inequity. And he paid the price. That's the Jesus narrative in a nutshell.

Consider two examples that illustrate this thinking.

## 2. THE DILEMMA

The first example is very distressing to have to recount.

Many of you will have heard of two Kenyan women, Grace Gichuhi and Teresia Ndikaru Muturi, who are facing deportation from Australia despite fears they could be subjected to forced genital mutilation or be killed when they are sent home. They arrived in Australia in July last year on tourist visas for World Youth Day.

In forced mutilation, 10 men hold the woman down, while another brandishing a knife cuts off the clitoris in front of as many as 30 onlookers, Ms Gichuhi said. In some cases it results in death.

They have been told to prepare for deportation after their applications to the Immigration Department for protection were refused, as were subsequent appeals to the independent refugee tribunal and Immigration Minister Chris Evans.

The problem is that the existing law does not include this kind of situation. The protection laws that would save these women from deportation have been proposed but not passed and this case can only be resolved by Ministerial intervention. Senator Evans, so far, has remained silent. (Extracts from *The Age* report 22<sup>nd</sup> September.)

I am sure that this case is a distressing choice for Senator Evans, as it no doubt was for his predecessors, but it raises very clearly the question of moral leadership. This is not a question of acting against the law because the Minister has the power to allow them to stay. It is a question of closed thinking ("If we let them stay, we will open the flood gates and then where will we be?"), or open thinking ("We cannot send these two back to such an awful plight.") You see what I mean about the difference between "what is about us" and "what is about the other".

But this raises another question. Where do we stand on this issue? It is in our power to assist Senator Evans to make his decision. We can write to him or even simply tell others how we feel. And whether we are talking about individuals or groups or religious communities or society, this form of openness makes it the norm because it has two key elements to it. One is a sense of TRUST and the other is related to that, a sense of HOPE. Without these, life turns in on itself and walls are built. A community in this situation fears change and growth (or renewal) becomes very difficult.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his book, *To heal a fractured world*, says this:

"Hope and tragedy do not differ about facts but about interpretation and expectation. But they make a moral difference. Those who hope, strive. Those who are disillusioned, accept. In that respect they are self-fulfilling prophecies. A morality of hope lives in the belief that we can change the world for the better..."

### **3. A NEW WAY**

President Barack Obama, in his address to the United Nations General Assembly last Thursday had this to say:

Together, we must build new coalitions that bridge old divides – coalitions of different faiths and creeds; of north and south, east and west; black, white, and brown.

The choice is ours. We can be remembered as a generation that chose to drag the arguments of the 20th century into the 21st; that put off hard choices, refused to look ahead, and failed to keep pace because we defined ourselves by *what we were against instead of what we were for*. [my italics]

Democracy cannot be imposed on any nation from the outside. Each society must search for its own path, and no path is perfect. Each country will pursue a path rooted in the culture of its people, and – in the past – America has too often been selective in its promotion of democracy. But that does not weaken our commitment, it only reinforces it. There are basic principles that are universal; there are certain truths which are self evident – and the United States of America will never waiver in our efforts to stand up for the right of people

everywhere to determine their own destiny.     *Address to the United Nations General Assembly, September 23, 2009*

For nations to adopt this approach is to redefine international relations. If powerful nations treat others as equal partners instead of people to be intimidated, there is hope for a whole new world order.

Two days later President Obama chaired the UN Security Council that produced a unanimous vote on a resolution that calls for states with nuclear weapons to continue disarming, to ratify a ban on testing them and to agree to a treaty stopping the production of fissile material. In return, non weapons states should accept stronger safeguards designed to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. While these have yet to be ratified, it is an historic step forward to removing nuclear weapons.

And then came the acceptance of the new plan to make the G20 countries the international economic forum. This plan, so effectively promoted by our own Prime Minister, will now give a voice to different parts of the world including the poorer countries.

We really seem to be moving away from the old ways into a new world where it is possible for nations to treat other nations and cultures with respect. Where we can step from behind the walls of fear and embrace the openness that will allow us to listen to others and to arrive at a position that is beneficial to all.

Maybe, this is the new morality of a globalised world where trust and hope is important.

It may even be that the new millennium is beginning now...

and we all can feel the trust and share the hope.