

## Highfield Rd Uniting Church

### Inside and Outside

Mark 9:38 - 50

*And, after a priest and a Levite walked past, a Samaritan stopped and helped the injured man, bathing his wounds and taking him to an inn to recover. The parable of the Samaritan is not just about sharing love to all who are in need, without a definition of 'neighbour'. It's a culture shaking parable about the danger of drawing boundaries and deciding who is 'in' and who is 'out'. Jews thought themselves to be the 'people of God', the 'in' people, and Samaritans most definitely 'out'. And yet here is a Samaritan acting with more love and grace than a priest and a Levite.*

When the disciples tried to stop a man from casting our demons in Jesus' name, they thought they were doing the good work of maintaining a boundary of 'in' and 'out', only to be chastised by Jesus, and called to a bigger vision of the world. God loves the world, the Spirit is active in the world, and doing good deeds, actions of love and healing, particularly in the name or following the example of Jesus, cannot be a bad thing. It's a reminder that we do not control or define the kingdom of God.



Rather, instead of looking out at the world and judging if others are a part of the kingdom of God, we should be carefully examining our actions to see if we are faithfully representing the kingdom of God.

At first glance the Lectionary selection seems to be disconnected stories, particularly when the translation you read has headings for each story. But they are connected. Connected by this idea of inside and outside. Connected by the warning to not assume that the church, the baptised community, is the perfected, incarnated kingdom of God. And placed here by Mark to reinforce the new way of God, that is about humble service and not glory and honour, that Jesus tried to teach the disciples by placing a child in their midst.

Firstly, a reminder that not everyone outside the community is automatically evil or unworthy - if people are not against us, they are for us. Whoever that unknown man was who was casting out demons in the name of Jesus, ironically, he was doing a better job than the disciples who couldn't cast out a demon in an earlier story. We do not define or delineate the outworking of God in the world. We do not define or delineate morality or right action in the world. Should we pooh-pooh the Smith Family because they are not a church-based charity? No! There is love and good deeds and compassion in the world apart from the communities of baptised followers of Jesus Christ.

*Following the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001, there was a multifaith prayer service in a baseball stadium in New York. Prayers were offered by the leaders of the many religious traditions affected by the tragedy. A group in the diocese of one of the bishops who participated in the service began a movement to have him deposed because he had legitimised the prayers of other faiths.*

There are people whose theology will be shaken by Jesus talking about a reward for someone outside the church who offers a cup of water to someone because they are a Christian! But that is the humble, inclusive, and accepting standard that we called to - we are not gatekeepers of the love of God.

And secondly, and I think more importantly, a warning that not everyone inside the

community is automatically a loving, humble, serving follower of Jesus Christ - there are members whose words and actions will scandalise the community and the name of Jesus; that is, not just cause a scandal but cause people to doubt or lose their faith. And we know that. Child sexual assault and its cover-up, pursuit of wealth while preaching about poverty, bullying behaviour in pursuit of power, teaching that leads to hatred, and the list goes on. The church is far from perfect, and Jesus is teaching his disciples to ensure that those imperfections don't damage the faith of the weakest and youngest members of the community - the little ones. These issues are as old as the writings of Paul. He warned the early churches to not use the freedom of the Gospel to 'scandalise' believers whose faith was bound up in law and moral standards. And the divisions in leadership that he pointed out in Corinth were not just about his pride, they would have shaken the faith of new believers - they would have stumbled in their walk. The extreme remedy of chopping off body parts cannot just be written off as another example of hyperbole. It starts to sound like Sharia Law and is undoubtedly the source of the self-inflicted brutality of the Middle Ages, with people trying to gain spiritual perfection by disciplining the body. What if, however, we read this as a collective instruction to the church - the body of Christ? This is the teaching that the leaders of the church should have followed when presented with accusations of priests or ministers behaving badly - remove them from the church, don't move them around to hide the shame.

Our faith in Jesus Christ as the Word of God and the Way for life is real and true and we should not water it down in the name of some sort of humanism, however, it is just as real and true to recognise that the influence of God is active in the world, and we are not the sole repository of love, compassion, and mercy. Believing that we are the only source of truth is often the beginning of behaviour and teaching that 'scandalises', that leads people away from the Word and the Way. The scandals around Brian Houston and Hillsong are a current example of what can happen when you pursue power and influence and status, believing that you are a source of truth, and that Christians are trustworthy, and nothing can go wrong.



Signs like this at recent anti- vaccination rallies are another example of a scandal in the sense of causing people to stumble in their faith. While we can laugh at the ludicrous theology, people could be either lead away from real faith to this bizarre religion or have their anti-church prejudices reinforced. These are not atheists or humanists trying to woo people out of the church, these are examples of Christians behaving in a way that makes people want to leave the church.

Do not cause the little ones to stumble in their faith journey. Following last week's story of welcoming the child that was really about welcoming all those of no status in society, this is not just about children, but about any who are new to the faith and vulnerable to bad messages, bad examples, and hypocrisy. May we live each and every day as role models of the love, compassion and faith that Jesus calls for all disciples to emulate.