

Pentecost 18
26/9/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Numbers 11:24-29
Psalm 124
Mark 9:38-50

**Who Speaks for the Church:
A Burning Issue?**

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

Who speaks for the Church? Our texts tell us this has been a problem from the beginning. We have just heard John the jealous disciple: “*We tried to stop him because he was not following us*”. To which Jesus replies: “*Don’t stop him!*” Or much earlier, Joshua, a dedicated “law and order” administrator, blurts out attempting to silence “unregistered” prophets: “*My Lord, Moses: Stop them!*” To which Moses responds: “*Are you jealous...?*”

According to our text, then, the word of Jesus is unequivocal: “*Those who are not against us are for us*” Recall, however, that we are told elsewhere that Jesus can also say: “*Whoever is not with me is against me*” (Matthew 12.30). Only a blinkered flat earth rationalist will shout: “Another contradiction. The Bible is riddled with them”. To which the rejoinder must be: Context is everything!

So, what do we make of the Gospel today? Who speaks for the Church? Who is truly a disciple? and What can disciples expect?

‘Teacher, we saw a man who was driving out demons in your name, and we told him to stop, because he doesn’t belong to our group’.

So, there we have it. The disciple censures the stranger because he was ‘not following us’. Note that: not following you, but not following US! So, it’s clear what the real problem is: the disciples don’t want to be followers, they want to be the ones followed. When this happens, party spirit becomes inevitable. The history of the Church might well stand as testimony to the exercise of such self-appointed guardians.

A mentor of mine used to say that church union became a problem the moment Jesus called his second disciple. This is not an exaggeration. Before the ink is dry we hear: *I am of Paul. I am of Apollos. I am of Cephas. I am of Christ* (1 Cor 1:12f). So the Pastoral Epistles try to solve the problem. Let’s have bishops, presbyters and deacons! But this is hardly more successful. Which Bishop? Alexandria or Antioch? Rome or Constantinople? Rome or Canterbury? Geneva or Canterbury? Canterbury or Wesley? Wesley or Booth? Stop them! Or closer to home, for its first 20 years the Uniting Church had a Doctrine Commission. No longer. Now it is Consensus. So, who speaks for the Church?

Today, as we know, it is not so much institutional denominations that stand over against one another, but factions *within* denominations: self-styled conservatives, progressives, liberals, fundamentalists, charismatics, social justice exponents – we know the list. Stop them!

No wonder Luther’s dying words are reputed to have been: “*We’re beggars that’s for certain!*”

So, “Who speaks for the Church?” is always a real question. And the answer? If we want to think properly about the Church, we will have to think first of all about Jesus himself. That means the requirement to resist party spirit. Against ‘exclusive brethren’, whether understood literally or figuratively, the definitions of belonging must ultimately be fluid. This is the first burden of today’s text.

And the second is this: the breaking of solidarity may well occur from *outside* pressure. It’s clear as the text unfolds that apostasy - rejection of the faith - has a long history from the very beginning. Here it is apparent that external persecution was causing some members of the church, not only to defect from the faith, but also to betray other members. For Mark’s community then the question understandably was: ‘*How is this fracturing of the Christian community to be handled?*’

In graphic images, he tackles it by offering four parallel penalties undoubtedly repugnant to the squeamish: first drowning – literally adopted, recalling the same Luther’s remedy for re-baptizing Anabaptists - then selectively, the removal of eye, hand, and foot to prevent a prospective casting into “hell”.

If it all sounds pretty awful, cheer up: context is everything! First, this confronting word “hell” is not what we might imagine. Here it is a regrettable translation in the text of the Greek word “Gehenna”. Gehenna is the name of a ravine in South Jerusalem. In the 1st century, the purpose of Gehenna was understood metaphorically. Although it was permanently ablaze as a place of fiery judgement for defaulting individuals, the crucial factor to grasp is that this destination was only temporary. Presumably it serves as forerunner to the later concept of purgatory. In any case, it was certainly only later in the Graeco-Roman period, and under Persian dualistic influence, that the bizarre *permanent* terminal imagery we associate with the word “hell” emerges – hell as a fiery alternative permanent destination to “heaven”.

The next penalties - the amputation of limbs, or the removal of an eye, obviously sound extreme. But the truth is that, in the first century, and still today in some Muslim communities, amputation of the offending member is in fact a *liberalizing* of punishment for capital offenses. Instead of losing an entire life, much better to lose only a part of the body. In any case, we can be confident that these vivid images were best understood metaphorically, the real point being that, in seeking the health of the whole community, *expulsion*, not execution, may well be the antidote to betrayal.

To this end, we are offered two remedial images – those of salt and fire. In the then practice of medicine, salt and fire were used to close amputation wounds. Drastic severance of eye, hand and foot obviously required prompt and decisive healing agents, otherwise death would be immediate. Knowing this, the whole passage surely looks quite different. ‘*Everyone will be salted with fire*’ we’re told. That’s the remedy for amputated limbs. That’s the remedy for apostasy: radical healing.

The point is that whatever we make of today’s text, one thing is clear: then, certain safeguards were required. Faith matters. It comes at a cost. There is a destiny at stake. Amputations, fire, and salt are a permanent scenario.

But salt has another function too. It is a healing remedy in a deeper sense. The injunction: ‘*have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another*’, is a recalling of the fact that in the Old Testament, salt is a symbol of the covenant. To share salt with others means really to share fellowship with them.

Today's gospel reminds us, then, that being church is to experience both internal as well as external pressure. For this reason, to live as Church is like riding a bicycle. When you come to obstacles you have to dodge them - or you'll fall off. This means that there is healing for all who metaphorically might consider themselves to have lost hand or foot or eye.

Today we can take comfort in the promise that the salt rubbed into wounds, though painful, is actually redemptive - not only in the reminder that Jesus said it would be like this, but that he himself lost not simply limbs but the whole of his being. The potential culling of limbs in our case is merely the start of what for him meant a final radical deprivation of life.

Yet the gospel is that we do not have the last word at all. For this dead one is sovereign Lord over all murderous, vindictive hearts: Where we fracture, he heals; whom we are against, he is for; in place of death he offers life.

So - despite the scary graphics - the Gospel today leaves us with real encouragement for a problematic future:

“Be salted with fire ... and be at peace with one another”.
