

17th After Trinity 2015

Mark 9: 38 – end

Slogan on a church notice board: “Drink is your worst enemy.” Next slogan: “Love your enemy.” Notices on the pew sheet: “Our focus for Advent is the nature of Hell. The choir rehearses at 7.30pm on a Wednesday in the church hall.” You can go on, either adding to the list of jokey mixed messages or getting into deep water, reflecting on the damage and hurt caused when people say one thing but send out quite contradictory signals. We’re told the Church of England repents of homophobia . . . but it’s a disciplinary offence for gay clergy to marry.

This morning’s Gospel reading seems to be full of mixed messages, too. Mark presents a very stern and uncompromising Jesus. He’s always hard on his disciples and, by implication, on us, too, as we exercise our discipleship. You know, in Matthew’s gospel Jesus describes people as having little faith; but

in the parallel passage in Mark he just accuses them of being faithless. So, in this passage he suggests that spiritual discipline is a matter of brutal intensity. It’s all about self-examination and then being drastically hard on yourself. Cut off your foot, gouge out your eye, press yourself to whatever lengths it takes to master Christian discipleship.

We’re increasingly encouraged to take discipleship seriously. We’ve not been very good at eliciting intentional commitment for people to make God the centre of their lives and base all their life style decisions on the basis of trying to be like Jesus. Churches in England are in a malaise and attendance has declined so rapidly in recent decades. Which means that we must be doing something wrong. Because we’re only hear in response to the call of Jesus to make disciples: to inspire and encourage people to meet follow Jesus and to create the opportunities for encounter with him. He is here now, as we open up his word and as we break bread together.

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Jesus told us that we've got to be as wise as serpents. And so we deploy strategies to for church growth. In an age which prizes efficiency and empirically proven procedures, there is a whole industry of church growth analysis and methodologies. We ignore their findings at our peril – well, actually at the peril of losing God's mission. The Diocese of York is buying into a "Leading your Church into Growth" programme. Because I'm involved in another programme that involves some residential periods away this year, we've not yet become involved with it at the Priory. But I'm sure that we shall. Everybody I know who's been involved in it in the past says that it's superb; and I'm sure it's just the sort of thing we should be doing if we take seriously the clear message in this morning's gospel to engage in God's mission with earnestness.

But there's a mixed message in this morning's Gospel. It does exhort us to be earnest in our discipleship, but there's a completely contradictory pulse within it as well. And the contradictory pulse says Never mind

obsessing about church growth strategies: just be at peace and get on with being the people God has called you to be. The problem with church growth strategies is that they're all about church. But there's more to life than church; and there's more to faith than religion.

The call to discipleship is to a 24/7 commitment. It is not about discovering and activating a religious zone within our personality which operates in complete isolation from all the rest of our personality. The vast majority of the stuff we do, day in day out, doesn't have a distinctively Christian or religious character. It's just stuff; getting on with life. We'd be doing it whether we were Christians or not.

But: when people-who-have-encountered-the-offer-of-a-living-relationship-with-God-through-Jesus – that is, people like us: Christians - are doing the stuff of everyday living, interacting with people, situations, institutions that have nothing to do with Christianity

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explicitly, it is nevertheless part of our discipleship; because being a Christian is a 24/7 commitment.

And that must mean that the Kingdom of God is as much ushered in by the everyday, non-religious stuff that we as it is by all our earnestly intentional efforts to grow church. Because God is bigger than the church. God is active through many more agencies than those that are badged up as Christian. Which is why Jesus, in this morning's gospel reading, tells his disciples to loosen up; to stop thinking that only they are the favoured ones; that only they, and nobody else, could possibly be doing Jesus' work. They'd been trying to stop someone from casting out demons in Jesus' name because he wasn't one of them. Jesus says, Don't stop him: whoever is not against us is for us.

We must take seriously, and deploy whatever tools are made available to us our responsibility to be as efficient and strategic in our mission as possible. But we must never do that at the expense of being outward

looking, open minded and generous hearted. We must never do it at the expense of forgetting that we are part of a community with whom we gladly and enthusiastically engage in partnerships – because if they're not against us, they're for us; and it's through these encounters that the Kingdom of God is built.

Amen.