

Sermon: We live in a spiritual world
Mark 9:38-50, James 5:13-20
Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight,
O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.”

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

The passage from the Gospel we read this morning, contains three aspects of the life of the Church that I want to consider today.

It speaks of the community-life of the Church, the casting out of demons, and the cup of cold water given to thirsty people.

Community

St John came to Jesus and said to Him:

Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.

St John was worried about the fact that this real ministry was undertaken by someone who was not part of the group that followed Jesus on a daily basis, and so he and the disciples had rebuked him to stop this outrage immediately.

Why did John bring this issue up at all? I think John actually confessed something that he felt guilty about.

The context of the story does hint to this. Shortly before John brought this matter up, Jesus had told the disciples off for quarreling about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of God, and Jesus had told them that being a servant is the sign of true greatness.

So, maybe John had realized that they should not have been harsh against the person they met, who was not following the group of disciples around Jesus, but who certainly believed in Jesus and his redemptive power to such an extent that he was casting out demons in the name of Jesus.

‘Lord, we told him to stop, but eh... that was wrong, then?’ Yes, That was wrong indeed, is what Jesus tells John.

The fact that the disciples tried to stop this person in his ministry was extra interesting, because Mark writes, in the same chapter, (Mark 9:18), about a man who had a demon possessed son, and the disciples of Jesus could not cast the demon out.

So they themselves were unable to minister very well, and they tried to stop someone from outside their group, who was really serving the people – simply because he did not belong to ‘us’.

Let me first focus on the positive attitude of the disciples that we see here. Because they had been with Jesus, they had a strong and growing sense of togetherness, a pride in their own community.

This sense of community is really the intended outcome of the Gospel. Our God unites people in a new community around His Son – that is where they are liberated and saved. In community.

People who follow Jesus Christ become a community, and it is exactly in this community that we meet with God. God himself is a divine community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the community of the Church around Jesus Christ is a beautiful reflection of the being of God.

We cannot separate the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ from the Church – which is the body of Christ. With all its warts and wrinkles, the Church is where God dwells. God is calling us to be a new people for him – a people, in togetherness.

And only in the context of this community, we get to know God through Jesus Christ. The western individualism – religion is a private matter between me and my God – is deeply untrue and unhealthy as well. The former Catholic pope, Benedict XVI, said it well:

We cannot have Jesus without the reality he created and in which he communicates himself. Between the Son of God – made flesh and his Church there is a profound, unbreakable and mysterious continuity by which Christ is present today in his people. [Pope Benedict XVI, *The Apostles* (Huntington, 2007), p. 13]

And we, here, are part of this wonderful Christ-community. He is here in our midst.

But having said this, we must also be clear that our community may be great, but it is not the only place where God reveals himself. Jesus prayed for the unity of all who believe in him, and so we cannot make the mistake that John and the disciples made.

The cause of Christ is not helped by those who claim that no real good can happen beyond the boundaries of one's denomination.

Let us take pride in the good done by our own Church, but without denigrating the good work of those who are 'not one of us'.

A spirit of narrow exclusivity must be rejected. When we are so full of our Church, our denomination, our organization that we believe it is the only true manifestation of the body of Christ on earth, we are not really serving Christ. The idea that we are better than others, that our group is better, though it is tempting, well, in our broken world we better leave that judgment to God.

As Christians we recognize the great blessings in other Churches. Pray for the other Churches here in town, including the Orthodox, the Catholics, the Pentecostals!

For in all Churches where people are baptized in the name of the Trinity, where Christ is preached and Holy Communion is celebrated, God is present and people are liberated, set free of sin, and fear, and the serve God.

2. Casting out of demons

Were it not for the lectionary, I am not sure that I would have chosen to speak on the casting out of demons. It feels so... eh... part of an updated worldview!

In our secularized heart, and as part of our secularized worldview, many of us, I think, have problem with these stories. We either relegate them to a mythical age of Jesus, or we simply ignore the stories, or we interpret them as belonging to the realm of the psychological.

But we must, I think, be intellectually honest – it is clear that for our Lord Jesus Christ, demons, and the possibility that they could overwhelm individuals, were an integral part of his worldview.

So either he was absolutely mistaken and he had what some would call a primitive world view, or we have, by and large, adopted a worldview that is really, actually, very mistaken and wrong.

The New Testament paints in vivid colors a spiritual world that is populated, not only by one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but by a host of spiritual beings. Angels, archangels, we even know the names of some. Like our own St Michael. The Bible portrays him as the leading angel in the universe.

And there are demons as well, and the devil, spiritual forces of wickedness. And even though the Christian Scriptures do not say much about that spiritual reality, they do speak clear enough.

Evil is a reality that we sometimes encounter. And that sometimes overwhelms people in such a way, that serious spiritual action must be taken to set people free from their influence.

One major problem we have, I fear, is that we have seen the exaggerations by people who see demon possession behind every problem, and we have seen their spectacular shows of “deliverance”.

That is not my cup of tea. But I, we, must not throw the child away with the bathwater. And speaking about water....

When you first entered into Church, when as a child you were baptized, these words were said to you as a baby – or words of this sort. At least if you were baptized in an Anglican, Catholic or orthodox church:

Fight valiantly as a follower of Christ
against the devil and all that is evil,
and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.
May almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness,
and lead you in the light of Christ to fullness of life.

These words I took from the liturgy of the Church of England, and this has been the confession of the Church throughout the ages. But in spite of this biblical and traditional confession, it is also true that we, certainly in the western world, seem to have lost the antenna for this reality.

Living in Egypt most of the time since 1988, and being in touch with Christians and Muslims in the Arab World, has made me realize how secularized my western heart is. In the western world

we suffer from an incredible and a totally unjustified pride and arrogance that we have been better educated and that we know better than people outside our small modern western hubs.

So as Western Christians, can learn from, and we ought to listen to Christians elsewhere. We are lucky that as Anglicans we are part of an international communion of which 80% live in the countries of Africa and Asia that are not so affected by the secularization of our world views.

I believe that we have to recognize this unbelief in our own heart, and repent from it. Not our so-called 'modern' scholars and politicians and philosophers have to inform us of what worldview to have, but as followers of Jesus Christ, we have to listen – afresh – to what He has to say, and to accept the world view that the Son of God presents to us.

And this includes the reality of a densely populated spiritual world, a world that touches our world, our lives, our Churches.

3. Cup

I guess it is because many Churches feel so shy about this whole matter that they prefer to fully focus on the cup of cold water that Jesus then mentioned; they put the full stress on the social side of the gospel.

And before you misunderstand me, let me underline that there are very good reasons to pay attention to the social side of the Gospel.

The Lord Jesus tells John off for rebuking that man who was driving out demons. The fact that the man did not belong to the group of disciples, did not mean that he was not a true believer in Jesus Christ.

According to our Lord, if someone does a great work in the name of Jesus Christ, he must be a true believer.

It is interesting that Jesus then jumps immediately to the example of offering a cup of water to a thirsty soul. As another example of a great work done in the name of Christ.

That is how broad the work of the Church in the world is – this is the range of the spiritual battle we are involved in - from the highly spiritual casting out of demons, to the highly spiritual work of offering a cup of water to a thirsty person.

To see our world as a spiritual world actually adds value to that cup of water. It adds value to our daily actions. It adds value to cleaning your kitchen, to your job, to being kind. Because it places all of our actions on the stage of the world of God: He and his angels and all spiritual beings surround what you do and give value to what you do.

But take care: in this instance, Jesus does not say that just any cup of water that is handed to just anyone, is a service to Him. He does not say that someone who renders some help to you because he likes you, is therefore part of the community of Christ.

What makes this cup of water so precious and a spiritual service to Christ himself, is that it is given to a person because he belongs to Christ. Jesus said:

Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

Jesus spoke these words in a situation of immense tension; to show allegiance to Jesus was a problematic thing in Israel. And St Mark wrote his Gospel with this story, in a situation where the Church was fiercely persecuted.

So, Jesus speaks of someone who, by giving a cup of water to the 12 disciples, visibly and publicly confesses that he is part of the community of those who follow Christ. It is a clear and purposeful choice that can even be painful.

Conclusion

The strongest testimony to Jesus Christ, is where the community of believers is united in the faith, irrespective of our denominations. Thank God for all places where He is worshipped and served.

And as believers we serve God in all of life. We serve him in the highly spiritual work of preaching and teaching and in the casting out of demons; we help people to shake of their spiritual shackles, to serve God with us.

But we serve Him just as much in the highly spiritual social battles – by offering food, and care, and love to fellow Christians in all sorts of tangible needs. And by offering it to all people in need.

God calls us to serve him together, in all areas of our life.

Amen