

## High St Uniting Church Frankston

### Who is in and who is out

### 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 out 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 invited to take on 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. 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 the warning to not to automatically jump to who is 'in' and who is 'out'. Rather, instead of looking out at the world and judging if outside the church are a part of the kingdom of God, we should be carefully examining our actions to see if we are representing the kingdom of God. These stories are placed here by Mark to reinforce the teaching of the new way of God, the way of loving, humble service and not glory and honour, that Jesus began by placing a child in the disciples' midst.

Not disconnected stories, but a two-sided lesson. 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 denigrate the Smith Family because they are not a church-based charity? No! There is love and there are good deeds and compassion in the world apart from the communities of baptised followers of Jesus Christ.

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. There are people whose theology will be shaken by Jesus talking about a *reward* for someone outside the church who offers a cup a 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; scandalise in both senses of the word. And we know that. Child sexual assault and its coverup, 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 still 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 – people who would have thought, "If this is what the church is about, I don't want to have anything to do with it".

The extreme language of chopping off body parts and being sent to hell cannot just be written off as another example of hyperbole. There is a lesson in here, hidden under hard language. Taken literally it is undoubtedly the source of the self-inflicted, and church 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? Paul, in Corinthians talks about the parts of the body – the eye and the hand and the foot. This can be read as a path of discipline. 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.

Do not stop people who are walking the way of God just because they aren't a member of the church, and do not cause the little ones - any who are new to the faith and vulnerable to bad messages, bad examples, and hypocrisy - to stumble in their faith journey. May we live each day as role models of the love, compassion and faith that Jesus calls for all disciples to emulate.