

**SERMON AT THE GELORUP ANGLICAN CHURCH 26 SEP 2021: GEOFF CHAWICK
PENTECOST 18 (SUNDAY BETWEEN 25 SEPT – 1 OCTOBER (OS 26B))**

MK 9:38-50

IT'S NOT ABOUT WINNING OR LOSING, IT'S HOW YOU PLAY THE GAME

“Geoff”, who are you going for in the grand final... the Dockers aren’t in it so you have to decide.”

So I was challenged!

“You can’t just I’ll hope for the best- you have to make a decision”.

Should I choose Brisbane because I have family in Queensland. Or should I choose the Swans who red and white match my original team: South Fremantle?

And so, I chose Sydney.

Now I hear a Docker supporter complaining:

“You chose who?! You can’t do that. You have to choose us, all the way. You can’t be against us-not even in the Grand Final!”

³⁸ John said to [Jesus], ‘Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.’ (Mk 9:38, NRSV).

Now, In football there are many teams, with their own traditions and idiosyncrasies – but the game is in common. Believe it or not it’s good to look beyond the interests of your own team and seek the good of football as a whole. We might follow a team “one-eyed” but we all know that “two-eyes” are needed for the League to remain healthy. Imagine an umpire with “one-eyed-itis”. It’s the surest way to ruin a game!

As you can tell, John in today's reading, is suffering from a bad bout of "one eyed it-is".

People not part of the disciples' team are casting out demons in Jesus' name. They are playing the game but are on the wrong team!

Jesus points out very quickly, that it's not a "wrong team" it's another team. Hear his words:

'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me.⁴⁰ Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. (Mk 9:39-41, NRSV).

I remember many years ago in another parish, the property manager said to me:

"I can always tell when you've been in the hall because the padlock is in the bolt the wrong way around- and you're the left hander!"

Ah I said:

"Don't you mean the other way around?"

(Was my response moved by the Holy Spirit?)...

Jesus said: "Whoever is not against us is for us."(Mk 9:40, NRSV)

Sometimes I think we forget just how divided society was in Jesus' time.

Yes, there were the Romans and the Jews, but we must not forget the Hellenists – who championed all things Greek.

Then there's the pagan gods – Roman and Greek – squabbling with each other in the heavenly realm.

Yes the Jews has their one God, but were divided on how best to serve him. The Pharisees insisting on the strict letter of the religious law, the Sadducees insisting on a more lenient approach, and the Essenes who hid away in the Dead Sea caves to follow an exclusivist form of Judaism.

Also let's not forget the people's preoccupation with social standing. In Rome, the Colosseum allowed people of all classes to enter, but was designed so they never mixed. Walls separated the classes and they were directed through separate exits and entrances.

One wonders if Perth Stadium is much the same – but that may be determined by ticket price!

Division was such a way of life in Jesus' time, it's hard to imagine that the fledgling church was not influenced by it. Just before today's passage the following incident takes place:

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my

name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.' (Mk 9:33-37, NRSV).

There is no doubt that after Jesus' departure from the earth, the early church suffered from issues of membership and leadership. The book of Acts and Paul's letters tell us very clearly about these things. One can imagine the people saying:

"Don't the Greeks need to become Jewish, like us, before they join us?"

Or "Who does Paul think he is speaking in Jesus' name! He wasn't even an original disciple!"

And so on...

Mtt writing some time after AD70 would be well aware of these squabbles and addresses them in his Gospel. He sees the bigger picture of Jesus. He puts the complaints of the early church onto the lips of John:

...we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.

And the anti-dote comes from Jesus:

Whoever is not against us is for us.

Mtt is urging the church to get back to basics. It's not about the interests of one particular team, it's about the good of the whole!

Curiously there's also a little point that can be easily missed. It's this:

[Jesus said] For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. (Mk 9:41, NRSV)

It's not about who's the greatest, who who's in or who's out- it's about humility. It's about humble acts of service. What could be more simple than giving a cup water – and what could be more life giving!

Some years ago I went to the St John of God Hospital in Subiaco to visit a sick parishioner. It was one of those extremely hot summer's days that we know so well in Perth. After the visit, I had a long, hot walk back to the car. On the way there was a deli, so I went in to buy a can of Coke. Looking somewhat hot under my clerical collar, the storekeeper said to me:

"No charge Father– that one's for you!"

And so, who had the greater reward?

Well, that's the wrong question.

There is no greater or lesser reward, there's just reward. And to this day I have never forgotten that simple act of kindness towards me.

Now if AFL existed Jesus' time, I wonder if he would have said:

"It's not about winning or losing – it's how you play the game."

Let's all go out this week and play a good game!

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

