

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson

**Sunday 26th September 2021 - 26th Sunday in ordinary time**

Readings (Year B): 1st: Numbers 11:25-29 Psalm: 18. 2nd: James 5:1-6.

Gospel: Mark 9:38-43. 45. 47-48.

**‘Your God is too small.’** A book by JB Phillips, a scholar, author and translator of the Scriptures in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Cent. which as young students we were encouraged to read.

The title has always remained with me, and the readings today brought it especially to mind, for it addresses the very questions raised by Joshua and John: a temptation always to limit God to our own narrow vision.

The first reading recalls the story from the Exodus that parallels today’s gospel. God is concerned that Moses is alone, so instructs him to choose 70 elders to help Moses with the care of the people. The Lord will take some of the spirit and bestow it on the elders.

The spirit here is thought of as God’s power enabling a man to prophesy – to speak under his direct influence. On this occasion Moses is not the only one inspired; so are the 70 elders of Israel who have been standing round the Tent; though they prophesy only for a time.

Even the two who stayed at a distance are similarly inspired. Moses’ young assistant, Joshua, expresses his concern that Eldad and Medad, who were called to be elders but were not formally confirmed as such by Moses, were nonetheless ‘prophesying’ among the Israelites. Moses realises that God’s spirit cannot be restricted by human limitations or expectations; he does not seek to control that spirit nor is he protective of his own prophetic gift.

Rather than stop the two ‘unauthorised’ prophets, Moses offers thanks to God for the gift he has bestowed on Israel through the two and the hope that all God’s people might become ‘prophets of justice and mercy. This scandalises young Joshua, who is jealous for Moses supremacy; Moses wishes all to have the same inspiration as himself.

John, always thought of as the youngest of the apostles, like Joshua, is offended because an ‘outsider’ has acted in Jesus’ name just as if he were

one of Jesus' known disciples. John twice refers to the man as 'not one of us.' John is trying to restrict Jesus' influence to the small circle that he has formed round him. The background to some of this is ambition.

Remember last week's gospel when the disciples won't answer Jesus for they had been arguing who was the greatest. As well as being arrogant and possessive John is also jealous. Just before this incident, the apostles themselves had been trying to exorcise an unclean spirit and they were unable to do it. They had to wait for Jesus to do it.

By the next chapter of Mark after today's, John and his brother James ask for special favours from Jesus. All very human, all very real today, as it was to Joshua and John.

Jesus does not respond directly to John. Without getting personal, he gives two reasons why they should let that 'stranger' go on his way. First: when someone heals in Jesus name he is, of course, on Jesus' side: 'Anyone who is not against us is for us.' The second reason is more important; you can tell that by the way Jesus uses the term 'Christ.'

John must understand that the disciples themselves will often be the ones who need to be helped and healed, but if John and his fellow disciples have a monopoly on Jesus, who will be there to help them? In other words, the mission of healing and saving humanity and the world is not the sole responsibility of the disciples. It is a mission that is entrusted to every believer.

The interesting thing to remember is that the disciples are themselves outsiders in their own society. In a world where they hope to be recognised and accepted in Jesus name, Jesus asks them to extend the same favour to others.

Jesus is not threatened by goodness outside his own chosen circle. If his passion is for the good of others, that passion will be served by anyone who does God's work. Jesus calls on each of us to be tolerant.

Christian tolerance is not weakness or a lazy acceptance of whatever movement happens to be in vogue. Christian tolerance is a reverence for the truth that is always larger than ourselves. It is a profound respect for the freedom of God to move in his own 'mysterious ways' It is a humility

before the greatness of God. After all, if God risks hoping in us, why should we deny his hope in others?

Jesus' reaction is like Moses: God's power is not confined to official channels, and any who show they are acting in God's power are doing the same work and must be welcomed.

Working in Jesus name brings its reward to anyone who is not against us,

Canon Philip Dyson

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