

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

"WHO IS ON THE LORD'S SIDE?"

"...He that is not against us is for us."


Mark 9:40

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THE RIVERSIDE
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Who is on the Lord's side? Those who live with a sense of vanishing glory note the dis-ease that has gripped the world like a virus and answer sadly, "Not many." Just this week a Harris Poll revealed that men and women in the United States place very little trust in their major institutions. Law firms, Congress, television news, the military, organized labor, major corporations, colleges, et al., all suffer from low public esteem.

Organized Religion is no exception. It was reported that only 32% of the American people have "a great deal of confidence" in the churches and synagogues of the land! Organized Religion placed fifth in a field of twelve, but at most that is cold comfort.

We didn't really need a poll to tell us anyway -- we knew it all along. Most of the numbers these days are bad. Bottom line figures on church attendance, church accessions, church giving are not encouraging. In Wall Street parlance it could be said that the church is experiencing the woes of a bear market!!

Who is on the Lord's side? "It's none of your business," comes another answer. God alone keeps the books. Souls and statistics, like oil and water, do not mix. Spiritual values are not measurable. But this approach has the hollow ring of a cop-out. Churches which in better times did not hesitate to publicize statistics are in no position now to disdain arithmetic.

Besides, the Bible does not shy away from numbers. Moses found it necessary to take a "body count" out in the wilderness. That's how the book of Numbers got its name! The gospel writers knew the figures, -- first twelve then seventy sent out. On the day of

Pentecost, Luke was not too bashful to tell us that three thousand souls were added to the church. Paul was not hesitant to allude to the five hundred men and brethren to whom the risen Christ had appeared.

Who is on the Lord's side? A certain sizing up is inevitable. The question deserves a hearing. The visible church, true, is not to be identified with the church invisible; but neither can the status of the church we see be entirely ignored!

* * *

Hold that question for a moment and feel your way into that tiny sliver of narrative recorded for our instruction in the 9th chapter of St. Mark's Gospel. Jesus, you will remember, had two intensely loyal and explosive disciples who were dubbed, appropriately enough, "the Sons of Thunder." I speak of James and John, those temperamental sons of Zebedee.

One day in Capernaum John reported on a happening that he thought would win a commendation from the Master. "Teacher," he said, "we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him because he was not following us." (Mk. 9:38) But John was rebuked rather than praised. Jesus said, "Do not forbid him ...for he that is not against us is for us."

(Mk. 9:39-40)

John saw the man in question as a probable pretender sadly lacking in valid credentials. He had never been close to Jesus. Out of a desire to keep the faith pure John told this lonely exorcist to stop. But Jesus proved more tolerant than John: "Do not forbid him. (i.e. Do not count him out.) For he that is not against us is for us." The early church extended this saying of Jesus' for catechetical purposes and rendered it: "He that is not against you is for you. The one who is far off today will be close tomorrow."

* * *

John here represents a tendency common in reli-

gious people to identify their sector of the kingdom with the whole. This tendency is sired by misguided zeal. How often in the long history of the church has one particular fold assumed that it was the entire flock of God. No group, however devout, has a monopoly on the truth, or exclusive franchise rights to set up shop in Jesus' name.

"Teacher we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him." Jesus said, in effect, "Cool it! Take your mission seriously but not yourselves." He might have gone on to add, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold, them also I must bring." (John 10:16)

* * *

Thank God we're past this "Johannine fallacy" now. Parochialism, for a variety of reasons, is as good as dead. Denominational pride and rivalry are things of the past. Some years ago a prayer was offered up in Cambridge, Mass. "for Harvard University and all lesser institutions." The spirit behind such self-serving piety is practically extinct. It used to be that we had Christians in this country who were like safety matches in that they could strike only on their own cover! But most of us have learned to strike on a variety of covers. God in His mercy has pulled his own together and given us a wider sense of family.

Here on this World-Wide Communion Sunday let the truth come home to every heart that the church of Jesus Christ comes in a host of colors, shapes and sizes, and is to be found in places likely and unlikely. "Unless those who do it are doing it our way they are not doing it at all." Not so. God is not limited to our expectations.

The Lord has His forces everywhere. When we start to ask, "Who is on the Lord's side?," we dare not be so provincial as to overlook the allegiance that He claims in distant places. During the month of August we were in Mexico. We visited in Mexico City with a young man and his wife who went there as fraternal workers. Their

field is audio visuals. We were pleased when the gentleman in question called us up and asked whether we would like to go to Cuernavaca on Saturday. He was going to that nearby community to visit a young American lad from South Carolina who was in hospital. Five minutes after he had been picked up as a hitchhiker the youth and his companions were involved in a ghastly auto accident. The father back home had called his pastor. The pastor, in turn, had called his denominational headquarters. A concerned executive got in touch with the office in Mexico City. The result, a young man thousand of miles from home was able to feel the encompassing concern of Jesus Christ.

Not only in such forms, but in other forms as well, there are vast and impressive initiatives being exerted by the church all across the world. Take, for example, the so-called "tired" churches of Europe. Some of us may know that in Europe right now there are more than ten million migrant workers. These workers and their families have moved up from the South in quest of a better wage. Great Britain is experiencing an inrush of migration from her commonwealth countries.

All sorts of problems have developed. In our own suburbs we know what happens when unwanted ethnics make an attempt to "break in." It was encouraging back in October last when Pope Paul VI addressed a European meeting on emigration and said, in part; "Christian communities which are afraid of losing their homogeneity, should they not rather see in emigration an urgent call to build up true communities, more mature and more ecumenical, in which the recognition of others, the participation with others becomes the rule of life?" 1

Younger churches around the world, especially those in Third World situations are helping the rest of us to see how we have sinned against the gospel by our excessive spiritualizing of the message of Jesus. I should like to testify in my own case that the most significant thing that has happened to me theologically over the last five or six years is my awareness of this truth. Liberation theologians have helped my eyes to see how neatly we have emasculated the gospel and con-

fined Jesus to the world within and the world to come and kept him safely uninvolved in the world round about! Some of the finest, most perceptive theology being done today is being hammered out in revolutionary situations by men and women who are discovering the compelling relevance of Jesus for the world as it is! Who is on the Lord's side? Far more than you think. "Do not forbid him," said Jesus, "for he that is not against us is for us."

* * *

But I want to carry the point one step further. God's will is being worked and furthered in the world by many who claim no formal allegiance to His name. Some whom we deem to be inside the fold are out, and some whom we deem to be outside the fold are in.

There are many demons to be exorcised: hunger, poverty, lingering colonialism, political oppression, prejudice, exploitation, etc. Often those who work to route these evils from the scene acknowledge no ties to Christ and have no time for the Church. Shall we then forbid them? The answer comes back quickly, "Do not forbid them, for they that are not against us are for us."

Some of these concerned human beings have been disaffected by the church for a variety of reasons. Yet, without trying to excessively idealize them, they are, in the main, living life in keeping with the Maker's purpose and direction. In many cases they practice Biblical values without a conscious loyalty to Biblical religion.

Every once in awhile Jesus made room in the kingdom for those whom the Jews thought did not have a chance. He had high praise for the Syro-Phoenician woman who had faith enough to believe that Jesus could heal her daughter. (Mk 7:29) He lauded the Centurion, a Gentile, whose servant was ill and who persisted in asking Jesus to help. Our Lord was so impressed that he said, "Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." (Mat. 8:10) (Which could be

translated, "Why even in my own church I never saw people believe like this.")

Frequently he exalted the Samaritans. In the parable of the Good Samaritan a total outsider is the one who does the right thing. The Samaritans accepted only the first five books of the Bible -- the Pentateuch. Jesus, in effect, is saying that some people with only a fraction of the Bible to support them come closer to the will of God than those who claim to believe the whole thing.

Some whom we deem to be inside the fold are out, and some whom we deem to be outside are really in. Faith has more allies than we are prone to suspect!

I mentioned last Sunday that young people in this country are not coming forward to enliven government, or the church, or the life we live together. Our young people aroused themselves for a spasm of activity a few years ago, but now they have retreated to the halls and offices of America's giant corporations, and their voice is muted.

Not so around the world! Young people are behind the action in South Korea to unseat an oppressive regime. Young people united in Thailand to overthrow a similarly oppressive regime, and got a new government in. Demons are being exorcised in a variety of places by legions of people, many of whom do not formally connect with Jesus Christ. In all too many places around the world the church reached an accommodation with demonic powers to its own profit. So, God has raised up "secular" voices to protest. They are heirs with us of the promised kingdom. God fulfills himself in many ways.

* * *

Who is on the Lord's side? "Teacher we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him...for he that is not against us is for us." Let me run it past you one more time:

The church is bigger than any single parish or tradition.

The Kingdom of God is greater than the church.

The Christ is often present in many who do not know or trust the name of Jesus.

God can take care of his interests -- waste no worry here. Who is on the Lord's side? Just be sure you are -- and be glad!

CLOSING PRAYER

*We thank Thee, God, for all who join us,
by whatever name or sign, in working
for a world in which Thy will is done.*

*Keep us steadfast and unmoveable
in the knowledge that in Thee
no labor is in vain.*

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

FOOTNOTE:

Fanto, Pietro, "Pontifical Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples," IDOC, p. 19, No. 10, 1974

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