

Gospel Reflection for Sunday September 29th 2024 – 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Fr Brian Maher OMI

26th Sunday
29TH SEPTEMBER
in Ordinary Time

“The teaching of Jesus is
“For whoever is not against us is for us.”
Reflection on these two statements for even
a minute shows us just how different they
are in principle and in implication.”

Read the full reflection by
Fr Brian Maher OMI on
this Sunday's Gospel



The
OBLATES
ALWAYS CLOSE to the PEOPLE

I remember watching the horror of 9/11 live on television in San Francisco. I was there at the time, combining a little study with a lot of rest. Like everyone else in America that day I sat, glued to the news channels, in shock and disbelief as the first one and then the second tower collapsed.

About a week later, I remember listening to President George W Bush address the nation at a Joint Session of Congress. In what I thought was a very thoughtful and sensitive speech, he spoke of 'freedom being at war with fear'. I also remember his very clear statement to the world that, 'nations not with us are against us' ("*Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.*") In the context of the time, it was a very understandable statement, but also a dangerous one.

Jesus, in this week's Gospel turns that same statement on its head, once again showing how much his message is 'at war' with the message of the world.

The teaching of the world is that "*either you are with us or you are against us*".

The teaching of Jesus is "*For whoever is not against us is for us.*"

Reflection on these two statements for even a minute shows us just how different they are in principle and in implication.

If we say, '*those not with us are against us*', we are creating for ourselves a world where only the views, beliefs, and values of those who agree with us are valid or accepted. Everyone else is 'against us' or is dangerous and must be stopped. It is a world where only two types of people exist: Those who agree with us...and the 'rest'...who are wrong! It is a narrow and negative world view, where we feel ourselves surrounded by actual or potential enemies. We find ourselves constantly looking over our shoulders, trying to spot those 'hidden' enemies who are just waiting to pounce when our guard is down. Over time it opens us to a kind of paranoia which can so easily be manipulated by those who use fear to achieve control and power.

If we live according to the principle: '*those not with us are against us*', our world becomes small and dark. Fear and suspicion haunt us, and trust becomes almost impossible. This is not a world I like very much, but it seems to be the 'real world'!

If, however, we say, as Jesus did: "*whoever is not against us is for us.*" then we enter a world which is open, positive and generous. There is room in this world for those who think differently but who have the same goal. In this world, instead of seeking out, in a negative way, those who are against us, we seek out, in a positive way, those who are 'with us'. Instead of being suspicious and fearful, we become trusting and hopeful. This is a world where 'different' does not equal 'enemy' and where 'gentleness' does not equal 'weakness.' This is a world I like very much, but is it just idealistic, a nice but unrealistic dream?

Even more dangerous, in my opinion, is what happens within us when we say, '*Those not with us are against us*'. Believing this allows us to set ourselves up as sole judges of what is good ('for us') and what is bad ('against us'). Worse, since we believe that only those who agree with us (are 'for us') speak the truth, our judgements are arbitrary and subjective. They are true only because we say they are true, and there is nobody to disagree with or question these judgements.

This seems to have been the mentality the disciples brought to their encounter with the healer in this week's Gospel. They tried to stop him from healing because he was not affiliated to the 'Jesus movement'. Their logic seems to have been, "How dare this man heal others, using the name of Jesus as his authority, unless he has been authorised by us to heal." Their conclusion, their judgement, was that since he was not 'with them' he was incapable of doing good.

When they proudly tell Jesus what they had done, notice that he does not take time to reflect on the wisdom of their judgement and action. He immediately and unequivocally calls them to task. "*Do not prevent him...*" he tells them. The reasoning Jesus used to make his judgement goes a bit like this:

Jesus: *Was he doing good work?*

John: *Yes, he was healing people.*

Jesus: *Then "do not prevent him". If the work he does is good, then he is 'with us'.*

Notice that the judgement of Jesus is not subjective or arbitrary. He is not saying, "This man is good because I

approve of him, or I like him, or I endorse him." He is saying, "...Look at the works he is doing; the works you are seeing with your own eyes. They are good works, done in my name. How could that be wrong?"

Isn't it amazing that once again the disciples (this time John, one of the three closest to Jesus) get the message of Jesus all wrong. They thought they were doing the right thing, protecting Jesus from someone he did not know who was using his name. Yet Jesus calls them to task for what they did.

Why, I wonder, did they find it so difficult to listen, to hear and to understand?

It must be, I think, because what he is saying to them goes against the grain. What he is asking of them conflicts with everything they were taught and believed.

Our natural human inclination is to say, "*If you are not with us, you are against us*". This is easy, clear and safe. Having someone going around curing people in the name of Jesus is dangerous when nobody knows who he is. How can Jesus be sure he won't say or do something totally different tomorrow? The man is what we might call a 'loose cannon', and loose cannons are very dangerous!

It takes an incredible amount of trust, self-confidence and humility to do what Jesus does here. His trust in God is absolute. Everything – and I mean everything – Jesus says and does is for the Father. In Jesus there is no "I"; it is always "You" ("**Your** Kingdom come; **Your** will be done on earth ..."). Nothing that Jesus says or does is done for personal gain or fame or fortune or reputation or promotion, or to be admired or liked. Even the most generous or altruistic thing I do will have some shadow or tiny threads of self-interest present – even if that is only 'to feel good myself' when I do it. In Jesus, there is only what the **Father** wants; what the **Father** sent me to do; what will reveal the Kingdom **of God**.

It is, I think, this total lack of self-interest which is behind the statement "*whoever is not against us is for us.*" If a person is doing good work, then Jesus says wonderful! He is not worried about his own reputation or good name or the damage this man might do to him in the future. Jesus' trust is utterly and completely in God and therefore he knows, with absolute certainty, that whatever happens will be for good.

Jesus often used small children to tell us what the Kingdom of God is like. I sometimes wondered why choose small children? It must have something to do with 'trust'. A small child will, without hesitation, walk on to train tracks, try to cross a busy road, put their finger in a light socket. Why? Because for the child, there is no such thing as danger. The child knows, and trusts that as long as a parent is there, everything will be OK.

Every parent knows that small children will say the most embarrassing things, or share awkward family secrets without any malice or intent to hurt. Why? Because the child has absolute trust in the parent or loved one. If Mum or Dad said it or did it then it is OK!

Small children have absolute trust that whatever happens to them, their parents will make it all right again. It is a wonderful quality and when we see it, we smile and somehow wish we had it back again ourselves. It is sad that all parents, teachers, and other key figures in a child's life have to teach them 'not to trust...' "Don't take a sweet from a stranger...", "Don't talk to strangers..." Don't believe what you read or what people say. Nothing is what it seems!"

When Jesus says to us, "*Unless you become like little children you will never enter the Kingdom of God.*" Surely he is saying, "...you must learn to trust God in the same way a small child trusts a parent."

This is the trust Jesus has in the Father. Like the small child, for Jesus, there is absolutely no pretence in this trust; there are no agendas present; there is no malice; there is no manipulation. Jesus' relationship with the Father is one of child-like trust – it is real, absolute and extraordinarily beautiful.

"...whoever is not against us is for us."

Jesus can say this only because he knows what trust in God is, and he knows that it is real, present, and for all of us, possible.

We have been taught 'not to trust', and we have been taught well. As a result, we have become cynical, suspicious of the motives of others, negative, sarcastic.

We have been taught that *'those not with us are against us'*, and we have been taught well. We have also learned that *'those (truly) with us...'* are few in number, and *'those against us'* are everywhere, hiding in plain sight, waiting to pounce when we least expect it.

That was the experience of 9/11 – the enemy in our own country waiting to pounce. It is therefore understandable that President Bush warned people to be careful.... *"Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."*

The message of Jesus, the message of the Gospel is that this need not be so. We can, if we want to, choose trust and hope and love. It means unlearning all we have been taught and it means taking a risk. It means trusting that the Kingdom of God revealed in Jesus is real and true. It means trusting that the message of Jesus is possible, if we choose it.

The only way we will even know is to try it!

I am reminded of the poem by Robert Frost...." *The Road not Taken.*"

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveller, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth.

...Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less travelled by,

And that has made all the difference."

Which road will I choose?

"those not with us are against us..." – easy, clear and safe. The most travelled road!

or

"...whoever is not against us is for us..." – the road travelled by Jesus. The road "less travelled by."

but

if we trust the word of Jesus and accept the message of the Gospel it is the road that *"makes all the difference..."*

Many thanks,
Brian.

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Gospel

Mark 9:38-43,45,47-48

Do not stop anyone from working a miracle in my name

John said to Jesus, 'Master, we saw a man who is not one of us casting out devils in your name; and because he was not one of us we tried to stop him.' But Jesus said, 'You must not stop him: no one who works a miracle in my name is likely to speak evil of me. Anyone who is not against us is for us.'

'If anyone gives you a cup of water to drink just because you belong to Christ, then I tell you solemnly, he will most certainly not lose his reward.'

'But anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have faith, would be better thrown into the sea with a great millstone round his neck. And if your hand should cause you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter into life crippled, than to have two hands and go to hell, into the fire that cannot be put out. And if your foot should cause you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter into life lame, than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye should cause you to sin, tear it out; it is better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell where their worm does not die nor their fire go out.'