

Sermon for All Saints' Highgate, Sunday, 4 July 2021

Seeking the Kingdom (Mark 9:38-50)

³⁸ John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' ³⁹ But Jesus said, '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.

⁴² 'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹ 'For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'

This morning I want to reflect with you on the mission of our church, All Saints' Highgate. I'm taking inspiration from the opening verses of our gospel reading, and looking to connect these with what I believe we are called to as a local parish church.

I wonder what you see as the mission of this church, which we call All Saints' Highgate. One way of thinking about our mission is to see us as called to attract new people to join us for worship on Sunday mornings. If that's how we see our mission, then we might want to focus on some relevant questions. One question could be: 'How might we broaden our musical offering, to include more contemporary styles of music?' If we're asking that question, then we'd be thinking about how to make our musical life more accessible to a wider group of people, hoping that this would draw new people in. A second question could be: 'How might we ensure that single people, couples without children, and also families with children across the full age spectrum, all feel included in what we offer?' In many ways this is a tougher question. How we make our Sunday morning gatherings genuinely inclusive of all peoples is a big challenge. It's one that not many churches have cracked. But it's still a question worth thinking about; and making changes to how we meet for worship, in response to informed reflection.

However, if we think about our church's mission as being called to attract newcomers to our Sunday worship, I think that we'll be making a mistake. It's the same mistake that the apostle John makes in our gospel reading. John brings this report back to Jesus: 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.'

Notice that last phrase: ‘because he was not following us.’ John seems to have slipped into thinking that the important thing is that people are following *us*. Becoming one of us, the church. Notice that John doesn’t say to Jesus: ‘because he wasn’t following *you*.’ Likewise, a mistake that we can make is to think that God’s mission is about us, and our church. Whereas what God is seeking is people who will follow and love Jesus. That’s close to what God’s mission is about. And if we’re to be faithful to God, that needs to be reflected in how we understand our mission at All Saints.

This is one reason that I’m delighted that All Saints is offering the Alpha course this autumn, beginning on Wednesday 6th October. We’re doing this in collaboration with Highgate International Church, using their building as the venue. What’s good about this is that the Alpha course is focused on Jesus, rather than on the church; and Alpha offers a one way – a proven and effective way – for people to explore what it means to follow Jesus, and why they might want to do that. So, I believe that helping people to follow Jesus needs to be part of how we understand our mission at All Saints.

But is that enough? Judging from Jesus’ response to John in our gospel text, I don’t think it is. Let’s look again at these verses. John is upset because someone was healing people, through casting out demons using the name of Jesus. And what upsets John is that this person wasn’t a fellow disciple. John and his mates therefore try to stop the person. We can have some sympathy for John. Sometimes things are done in Jesus’ name which are deeply embarrassing, or even downright wrong. And we might want to disown or denounce those things. But here, something good is being done in Jesus’ name. And, when that’s the case, Jesus says we should welcome it, even if the person doing it is not ‘one of us’. In other words, if it’s good, it’s OK, even if they’re not part of the church. Like John, we might be surprised at Jesus’ answer. But Jesus is pointing to the bigger picture. He’s saying, ‘It’s not about the church. It’s about the kingdom.’ Elsewhere Jesus identifies the mission of God as being about ushering in God’s kingdom. A kingdom where all are made whole, and where all are equally valued. A kingdom for which Jesus teaches us to pray, when we pray to God: ‘Your kingdom come.’

If we’re looking to articulate our mission at All Saints’ Highgate, then I think we need to find ways to think about how we’re welcoming and releasing more of God’s kingdom, as well as inviting people to follow Jesus. And if we’re thinking of ushering in more of God’s kingdom, then we need to think wider than the church.

I’d like to illustrate this with reference to one of my favourite cinematic films. The film is called *Babette’s Feast*. This is a Danish film made in 1987. It’s a slow-paced and heart-warming film; and far from a Hollywood blockbuster in its style.

The film tells the story of a Danish religious community, who are rather dour and severe Protestants, situated in a remote coastal village. The community was founded by a pastor, the father of Martine and Philippa, key protagonists in the story. These two sisters end up giving shelter to a French refugee, called Babette, who arrives on a boat having fled the French Revolution. Unlike Martine, Philippa and the rest of their community, Babette has no explicit Christian faith that we can discern. However, she has a great gift as a cook. As Martine and Philippa are too poor to pay for a servant, Babette exchanges food and lodging in return for cooking for the sisters. And she cooks for others in their congregation whom the sisters feed in their charity. Previously the abstemious sisters and their congregation ate exceedingly bland fare. Babette transforms their meals into tasty food, albeit still with simple ingredients. And over the ensuing years she gains the respect of Martine and Philippa and their congregation.

Babette retains one link to her former life. This is a lottery ticket which a friend in Paris renews for her each year. One day, a boat arrives with news and a package. Babette has won the lottery: the huge sum of 10,000 francs. Martine and Philippa are saddened, convinced that Babette will now return to France. Instead, Babette affirms that she'll remain, and cook a sumptuous meal for the sisters and their small congregation to mark the occasion of the founding pastor's 100th birthday. What Babette prepares over the coming days is a sumptuous feast beyond the little community's wildest imaginings.

When the festival day comes, the gathered congregation at first try not to comment on the food's ravishing and exquisite taste, as such sumptuousness runs against all their austere habits. But as the long meal progresses, with each course accompanied by the finest of wines, their defences are broken down, and they find themselves elevated both physically and spiritually. Over the course of the meal, old wrongs are forgiven, ancient romances are rekindled, and the spirit of the community is transformed into the first love with which they'd originally begun: it proves to be a eucharist, in the deepest sense. After the meal, Babette reveals to the sisters that she was previously the head chef of one of the most renowned restaurants in Paris. And that the price of such a dinner for a group of 12 was 10,000 francs: her entire lottery winnings, which she'd now spent in full on their congregation.

Babette is an outsider in the Danish religious community. She's not one of 'us', she's not one of the Christian disciples. But the surprise is that she proves a huge blessing to the community, providing a foretaste of the kingdom of God through her extraordinary generosity and great culinary gifts. Indeed, Babette's feast brings about the renewal of the community, and the reviving of their first love.

Let us return to thinking about the mission of our church, All Saints' Highgate. What the story of Babette illustrates, is that we are called to look for the coming of God's kingdom, here in Highgate and in our respective neighbourhoods. And that in looking for signs of God's kingdom, we should expect that God's kingdom may be released or revealed from unexpected quarters – by those who are our neighbours, but who don't look or feel like 'one of us'. Through people who have particular gifts to share which may be in short supply in our church. Gifts which we need in order to experience more of life in all its fulness. Gifts which can bring us a taste of the healing and wholeness of God's kingdom.

Just as for Martine and Philippa with Babette, this will take the building of deeper relationships of trust with our neighbours in the parish and beyond. It calls for humility, recognising that the gospel isn't about us, but about what God is doing in the world. And it requires an openness of the kind that Jesus speaks about to John. A readiness to receive from those who may seem different to us; and to receive from people who may be foreigners in our eyes, as Babette was to the Danish community. Because as Jesus reveals to John, God's Spirit is at work well beyond the church, among people who may surprise us. Which means remembering, as Jesus tells his disciples, and as Babette showed her Danish hosts, that: 'Whoever is not against us is for us.'

To recap: in thinking about the mission of All Saints, it's OK to think about how we might attract new people to join us for Sunday worship; but it's not enough. More fundamentally, we need to help people explore what it means to follow Jesus, and encourage them on that journey. And we also need to look for how we can welcome more of God's kingdom, alert to surprising ways that this may come, through neighbours who may not be 'one of us', but who prove to be 'not against us, but for us'.