

In league with the devil

A sermon on Matthew 9:27-38 by Nathan Nettleton, 2 February 2020

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Message

Jesus calls us to follow his lead in bringing healing, hope and positive leadership to others, and not to be too worried about anxious and vexatious criticism.

Sermon

A few days ago, I received another email from a fellow who has been putting an enormous amount of time and energy into trying to correct all the errors in my understanding of God, and to get me back on the orthodox straight and narrow. I have a fair bit of respect for this fellow, because unlike many of those who write to try to correct my heresies, he has been respectful and genuine in the way that he has engaged with my arguments and set out his own. Most of the others just scream at me and tell me I'm wrong and I'm going to hell, without ever engaging with anything I say. This bloke is much better than that.

But this week's email surprised me because of the way it just wrote off someone else with an unqualified blanket condemnation. He said that he had detected the influence of the Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr in my sermons, and wanted to warn me off him. He sent me a list of no less than seven online critiques of Richard Rohr's teachings, and expressed the hope that they would be enough to warn me away from Rohr in the future, and cause me to reassess any of his ideas that might have rooted themselves in my own beliefs!

It reminded me of (comedian) Rod Quantock commenting on Andrew Bolt (controversial right wing journalist). He said he had reluctantly realised that he needed Andrew Bolt, because he didn't always have time to research everything for himself, so when time was tight, he could just check up on what Andrew Bolt had to say about something, and then confidently think the opposite. My correspondent seemed to be implying that anything said by Richard Rohr is similarly automatically wrong.

Now as it happens, I do think Richard Rohr's latest book has gone off the rails, but previously I have certainly been a fan. I have met Richard Rohr, and in person, like in his books, he strikes me as a genuinely loving, gracious, compassionate and prayerful person. His teachings have been healing, liberating and life-giving for many people. Like Jesus, his views are divisive because others don't like them, not because he is rude or aggressive towards his opponents.

An hour or so after reading and pondering this email, I sat down again with the gospel reading for tonight to work out what to preach from it. And I was immediately struck by the response of the Pharisees to the public acclaim over Jesus's miraculous healings of two blind people and a person who couldn't talk. They accused him of being in league with the devil. "It's from the ruler of the demons that he gets the power to cast out demons," they said.

This is one of two times in Matthew's gospel that the Pharisees make this accusation, and it is in the other one that Jesus responds in detail. On this occasion he seems to more or less ignore it. Evidently there are more important things to attend to than what the Pharisees might be thinking of him. So I'm not going to import Jesus's response from the other passage into this one. I just want us to pause for a moment and think about the nature of this accusation, and then, like Jesus, move on to what's next on his agenda.

One of the things we see in the healing stories that have been recorded about Jesus is how symbolic they are. They are told in a way that emphasises them as symbols of something bigger. So there are lots of stories about Jesus opening the eyes of blind people because so much of his teaching is trying to open our eyes to see things that we have previously been unable to see and understand. Last Sunday afternoon, Uncle Den opened our eyes to a whole lot of things we had not previously seen about the *Ten Commandments*. When Jesus did things like that, the gospel writers would pair it with a story of healing a blind person to illustrate what was going on.

There are also quite a few stories of Jesus healing mute people because his teaching was not only opening our eyes, but giving a voice to the voiceless, giving the power to speak out to those who had previously been silenced.

Tonight's passage contained both. And so it is in response to Jesus opening people's eyes and giving a voice to those who had been silenced, that the Pharisees object and accuse him of being in league with the devil.

A bit like my email correspondent's assessment of Richard Rohr, they are saying, "He's not one of us and his teaching doesn't agree with ours, in fact it sometimes even undermines ours; therefore he must be on the other side, he must be an agent of the devil."

This is actually an example of one of the things that Richard Rohr has often spoken about – dualistic thinking, thinking that everything can be simply divided up into good and bad, right and wrong, our side and the devil's side. As soon as the Pharisees feel themselves opposed to Jesus, they instinctively think in terms of opposing sides. If we're on different sides, then one of those sides must be bad and wrong, and it can't be us, so it must be him. He must be in league with the devil.

You can see how the thinking works. When we think in absolutes, it becomes impossible to imagine that God might be working in and through those who are not 100% on the side that we regard as good and right. Instead of imagining that a compassionate and merciful God might be reaching out to us through a thoroughly flawed and frequently mistaken person, we divide up the world into those who are blessed by God and those who are condemned and cursed by God. Therefore if we are sure of our own correctness, and a Jesus or a Richard Rohr teaches something different, we write them off as dangerous heretics who must be in league with the devil. Our dismissal is absolute.

I have significant misgivings about Richard Rohr's latest book. Does that mean I think that he is now in league with the devil? No it doesn't. Does that mean that I think that God will no longer use his writings and teachings to bring healing, hope and freedom to anybody? No it doesn't. It doesn't even mean I think that God won't use this book. God is outrageously merciful and astonishingly creative. God can even take an abominable evil like the crucifixion and work through it to bring healing, mercy, hope and new life. Working through Richard Rohr, or even me, should be a piece of cake in comparison to that.

So how does Jesus, on this occasion, respond to the accusation that he is in league with the devil? Well, the very next verse simply says, "Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every

disease and every sickness.” In other words, his only response was to go right on doing exactly what he had been doing when they made their accusation.

Then it goes on to say that when Jesus “saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” This is a fairly pointed statement by the gospel writer because of course the Pharisees saw themselves as the designated shepherds of the people. If Jesus is seeing the people as being like sheep without a shepherd, then he is seeing their religious leaders as being asleep at the wheel, and he is stepping into the breach.

But Jesus doesn’t step into the breach alone. In his compassion for these lost and leaderless people, he says to his disciples, to us, “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.”

That’s the end of what we heard tonight, but right after that Jesus calls together his twelve closest followers, and for the first time gives them authority to teach, heal and liberate as he has been doing, and sends them out to do just that on his behalf. And if you have doubts about whether God would call and send people who haven’t got their theology straight or their act together, just read some more stories of these twelve disciples and how often they have Jesus tearing his hair out over their thick-headedness and total misunderstanding of him.

But in order to segue from this into the blessing of the school children which we will observe in a few minutes, I just want to conclude by thinking about the connection between that and this idea of praying for and being the labourers who God sends into a world in need to be better leaders, better examples.

If the world in which Jesus moved left people feeling like sheep without a shepherd, look at the world these young people are growing up in today. The failures of leadership among our political leaders have been big news in the past month or so. And the monumental failures of institutional church leadership have been making us all cringe for years.

This little congregation in this little place can’t fix all that. We can play our part, but the issues are not all within our sphere of immediate influence. But these young people are, and they badly need to see the faith lived out in community with compassion and mercy and genuine all-inclusive love. They will see plenty of examples of corrupt and self-serving leadership, but they need a place where they can find mentors and friends and examples who will model for them lives of ongoing growth in faith, integrity and love. We are called to be that place and those people. And we are called to pray to the Lord of the harvest for the courage and nous to do it well, and for more good people to be sent to join us in modelling this life for these youngsters.

And at the heart of modelling that life is a practice of mercy and compassion that creates space for others to share the task, even when we don’t agree with everything they do or say. We want these youngsters to learn to recognise the grace of God, whoever it might be seen in. Because our hope and our prayer for them is that they will truly be and be seen to be followers of Jesus. And Jesus did not say that his followers would be known by their defence of orthodoxy and their passion for correcting errors. He said that his followers would be known by and for their love.