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A Plea for Tolerance (Mk 9.38-40)

E.A. Russell

A characteristic that attracted people to Jimmie Haire was not merely the remarkable warmth and friendliness of his personality but his essential humanity, expressed in his exceptional openness and sympathy for people of all persuasions and creeds. In an Ulster situation of bitter credal prejudice his influence within the College and among its students and throughout the church at large was salutary and served to strengthen the resolve of all those who sought reconciliation. It is in warm tribute to him that this passage has been chosen

The passage runs as follows:

38 John said to him: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name who does not follow us and we tried to prevent him (*ἐπιτιμασμένον*) because he was not following us."

39. But Jesus said: "Do not prevent him; for no one who does a mighty act in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. 40. For he that is not against us, is for us.

This is an extraordinary story, peculiar to Mark and used with some alterations by Luke. It appears to have circulated on its own probably as oral tradition and can as easily end at v39 as at v40 with preference for the former. /1 Luke dispenses with v39 as unnecessary since the point is brought out sufficiently in v40. The saying of v40 also occurs in Q in connection with the Beelzebub controversy: "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters" (The saying is identical in word and order in Lk and Mt: Mt 12.30; Lk 11.23)

We have here in Mk yet another instance of the very imperfect nature of the church as evidenced generally in the disciples (unless the word "disciple" as "learner" is to be taken seriously and Mk is showing how the church grows into maturity). They misunderstand Jesus' suffering vocation (8.31-33) or his resurrection (9.10); the manner of healing for a helpless church (9.29) or, in spite of a second prediction, Jesus' suffering (9.32) or what constitutes the order of the Kingdom of God (9.33-41); and here their repudiation of the unusual exorcist (9.38-39). The sequence of error, of misunderstanding or of helplessness-

ness is driven home with little let up and only as the word of Jesus is taken seriously and his mission understood can the church really represent Jesus to the world, can the kingdom come with power. (9.1)

The passage does not have clear links with what precedes. All that appears to link them together is the catchword "in my(your) name" and the situation of misunderstanding. Here then is an exorcist extraordinary. We do not know his name. He could well be a representative of something that occurred more frequently than Mk suggests if, as is claimed, he merely gives us typical instances of what happened in Jesus' ministry. What gives point to the whole story is that this man does not belong to the circle of disciples (ὁ ἄνθρωπος οὗτος). This general understanding has been questioned by T.J. Weeden among others who consider the anonymous exorcist as a member of a Christian group separate from that of the disciples. /2

Thus we have here someone who does not share the call of Jesus or his command to preach or to expel demons (3.13,14) He does not receive the instruction that Jesus gives to his own disciples in private (4.34) but is among "those outside" (οἱ ἔξω) (4.12) and yet this man uses Jesus' name. Here is someone of whom we have no record of repentance or of faith (1.15), basic requirements of true discipleship and yet has a remarkable manifestation of the power of God. Is there in this exorcism God's signal manifestation to this man, a manifestation of his Holy Spirit, which eventually drew him within the church? Is there a certain parallel in Lk's account of Cornelius who, before he is baptized, has a definite outpouring of the Holy Spirit? God does not always work within fixed categories nor can his action be dictated. Paul would probably describe such a man as "natural" (ὁ φυσικός), one who does not understand "the things of the Spirit" (1 Cor. 2.14 τὰ ἄρρητα τοῦ πνεύματος) though he does seem to leave open the possibility of revelation within creation (Rom. 1.18ff). Here is one outside the traditional categories, who is happy to use Jesus' name without prejudice and demons are expelled.

Did this event take place in Jesus' time or does it come from the later church? Did people in Jesus' time take his name and use it for healing purposes? Quite apart from the awkward question of using the name, is it likely that the sick person would use an intermediary when it was possible

to consult Jesus? The Marcan presentation of the crowds who came for healing does suggest a wide-ranging and well-known ministry. It tends to make us forget that it is probable that the main centres of his ministry would be Capernaum, Bethsaida and Chorazin (cf Lk 10.13ff and par.) Use is made of 1 Cor.2.8 to support the claim that Jesus' ministry was not well-known ie if the rulers had been aware of Jesus and his work, they would not have crucified him. /3

A major obstacle to accepting the historicity of the account is the use of Jesus' name in exorcism. Does it suggest that Jesus is a heavenly being on whom the exorcist may call. /4 But is it really necessary that Jesus should be thought of as a divine being? Otto Böcher points out how varied are the names used in exorcism. Jews chose the names they considered effective eg the name of Yahweh or at the other end of the scale, the name of the prince of demons eg Beelzebub. Solomon also was a name used frequently which, with his reputation for wisdom, would not be surprising. The names of those who were known to be successful exorcists were also used. If this is the case, then it is not surprising if the name of Jesus should be used by a strange exorcist in Jesus' lifetime. /5 The expression "follows us" is unusual (ἀκολουθεῖ ἡμῶν) though it could be merely a loose description for discipleship of Jesus. Further it could reflect a situation when the church had its own distinctive identity over against Judaism ie a period later than Jesus. Would the church however create such a story with its liberal outlook? /6 Others suggest that the sudden introduction of the name "John" without explanation favours historicity. /7

It is evident that the account caused embarrassment to the more rigid elements in the church. Mt prefers to leave it out. Indeed what record we have we owe to Mark who has a habit of saying startling or provocative things. For Mk Jesus is the central or focal point of exorcism. The appointment of the disciples for mission included preaching, healing and exorcism. Yet it is only when Jesus sends them out that they do so (Mk 3.14f;6.7) Lk includes the pericope perhaps because he has come into the church from paganism and this makes him have a sympathy for all sorts and conditions of men and women, cutting across barriers where a Jew might have hesitated.

Attached to this brief passage, as we have seen, is the

name of John. John nowhere else in Mk appears without James or Peter (cf also Lk 9.49). In spite of the greater prominence he enjoys in the later church, in Mk John is either described as "the brother of James" (1.19;3.17) or his name follows that of James (1.29;5.37;9.2;10.35,41;13.3;14.33) Thus it is only here in Mk that John alone speaks for the church ("WE saw...WE tried to prevent") and rather typically brings a critical report of the unusual exorcist who used Jesus' name and whom he tried to stop. If Mk as has been already suggested takes the story from oral tradition, he tells the story in his own way. This is suggested by the typical redundancy of "Who does not follow us" (ὅστις οὐκ ἀκολουθεῖ ἡμῶν) and "because he does not follow us" (ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἀκολουθεῖ ἡμῶν) Such redundancy may help to confirm what the original text was. Mk then expresses the original tradition in typically expansive fashion and this in turn brings out the point which must not be overlooked - "He does not follow us". The verb used (ἀκολουθεῖν) becomes in the synoptic gospels almost a technical term for discipleship (If it is used for the crowds who "follow" Jesus, does it suggest they are on the verge of discipleship or does it indicate the rich field of possibility that could await the church?) Therefore to say "He does not follow us" is in effect to say "He is not a disciple."

John is linked with another story of intolerance in the Lucan tradition. Jesus has sent disciples to prepare for his visit to a Samaritan village (9.52-56) The very fact that Lk takes the trouble to record this incident is in itself significant. Here and only here in Lk of the synoptic gospels do we have the story of a visit to a Samaritan village. This appears to contradict Jesus' instructions in Mt where the disciples are told not to go to the Samaritans. (10.5) Mk is silent about any such mission. This must give rise to the query - Do Mt and Mk share an anti-Samaritan prejudice which they have not been able to overcome and which dictates the very material they choose for their gospel? Whatever may be the explanation, there could be no more unlikely mission than that chosen by Jesus in Samaria. (This makes the record in the Fourth Gospel all the more remarkable for its success? Is it an attempt to rehabilitate the Samaritans in the eyes of the church or is their response to make the lack of response of the "Jews" all the more reprehensible?) The prejudice was of long standing with both

sides suspicious of each other and tending to distrust any genuine movement of friendship. It is small wonder then if they refused to accept the advances of these strange Jews. Were James and John part of the group of messengers? It is possible they were not but managed to avoid taking part in the advance group. If this suggestion is feasible [Note the strange "seeing" (ἰδούτες)], then this prejudice may have manifested itself earlier in reluctance to be part of the advance group of disciples. Whatever may be the situation, there can be no doubt about the inherent hostile bias which flared up at the insult offered by the Samaritans: "Do you want us to command fire to fall from heaven and destroy them?". The question misuses scripture to justify violent action. Prejudice does not scruple to quote scripture to justify its actions. The prejudice is compounded of injured pride, of contempt, along with a sense of superiority and disdain all the more acute since it came from the despised heretical Samaritans.

Thus we can the better build up the picture of John's intolerance. It is interesting that the description of James and John as "boanerges" ("sons of thunder") is only found in Mk. We could well have expected it to be appended in Lk to the account of the Samaritan mission. Lk may wish to avoid any slight on the two apostles, all the more necessary since it would come from a non-Jew. He would have known of the description, assuming he made use of the form of Mk's Gospel known to us. The weakness of this suggestion is that Lk does not scruple to include the account though it is possible that the original account did not include the names of the two brothers. / 8 Here again John has misunderstood the mind of Jesus. He has to receive instruction to become a more adequate disciple. Thus Jesus rebukes him on both occasions. It should be remembered that Mk and Lk address different situations and have their own distinctive point of view. Mk's view of the death of Jesus sees it, at least in part, as a triumph over evil spirits. It is a cosmic triumph and does not exclude the exorcisms that others may perform outside the church. They are not outside the implications of Jesus' death for the whole world. Further he can be interpreted as addressing the church in the post-Neronian period. It is a time when their membership has been decimated by persecution or desertion. Instances like that of the exorcist who uses Jesus' name could be a source

of reassurance. The power of Jesus is still at work in the world even through strange channels. Luke on the other hand is sensitive to the divine plan as predestined and at work in the world where the church must continue for a time. He soft-pedals or muffles the stress on the coming return of Jesus and lays stress on the work that has to be completed first. God's programme of expansion is unaltered. It is "Jerusalem Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth". The pattern lays its stamp on the Gospel of Luke as well as Acts where the parallels can be traced clearly. It is in the will of God that the mission to the Samaritans be carried out whatever prejudices stand in the way.

We return to the Marcan passage under consideration. There as we have seen the church tries to stop the strange exorcist. The verb used for "stop" we have seen is $\kappa\alpha\lambda\acute{\upsilon}\psi\epsilon$. The only other place in Mk where the word occurs is in connection with the blessing of the children. There is a poetic rhythm in the form of Jesus' saying:

Permit the children to come to me.

Do not prevent ($\mu\grave{\eta}\ \kappa\alpha\lambda\acute{\upsilon}\psi\epsilon$) them.

The kingdom of God is made up of such as these.

Here yet again we have the rebuke of Jesus for conduct that is contrary to true discipleship. This story with those previously mentioned could be linked to the programme of instruction of the church. The way in which it begins: "They brought children to him that he might touch them" recalls the healing stories (Mk 2.4; Mt 4.24 etc) /9 Böcher /10 (op.cit) takes the "touch" as referring to the laying on of hands (So Mt 19.13) People might understand this as warding off from the children hurtful spirits or perhaps the possibility of demons taking hold. Böcher makes a strange suggestion by way of explanation of the disciples' hesitation. Did they fear reducing Jesus' power in his laying on of hands in blessing? Or had the children not made up their minds about Jesus or were under the control of demons like some exorcists? [It is hardly likely that the former could be said of the "babes" (Lk first uses $\beta\rho\upsilon\tau\acute{\alpha}\tau\eta$) but rather of older young people ($\pi\alpha\iota\delta\acute{\iota}\alpha$ so all synn.)]

Note the strong expression used in Mk of Jesus' reaction. He was highly indignant ($\acute{\alpha}\gamma\alpha\lambda\lambda\alpha\kappa\tau\acute{\epsilon}\omega$). Yet again Mt and Lk agree on omitting an expression of emotion on Jesus' part. (Do they not really know one another's work?) This heighten-

ing of christology on their part is perhaps to guard against any diminution of the authoritative saying of Jesus as something spoken in extreme indignation or perhaps a result of extreme reserve in the use of human emotions of Jesus. The intolerance of the disciples of young people suggests children are unimportant. Rabbis were not always certain about the place of children, an uncertainty that extends to the church of today. / 11 The definitive saying of Jesus, shaped in the course of preaching and teaching within the church, defines the position of children for the church. Indeed a claim is made that it has been shaped in the baptismal liturgy of the church.

Notes

1. Ernst Haenchen, Der Weg Jesu, Berlin 1966 prefers v39 ad loc.
2. Theodore J. Weeden, Sr, Mark, Traditions in Conflict Fortress 1971 63
3. Haenchen, op.cit. writes: "Jesus hat nach 1 Kor.2.8 nicht so viele und so grosse Wunder getan, wie es nach der von Mk wiedergegebenen späteren Tradition aussieht. Schon das macht es unwahrscheinlich, dass ein jüdischer Exorzist bereits sich zu Jesu Lebzeiten des Namens Jesu bedient hat."
4. Haenchen, op.cit.
5. Christus Exorcista, Berlin 1972 88
6. Cf C.E.B. Cranfield, The Gospel According to St Mark Cambridge 1959, 309
7. Cf K.L. Schmidt, Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu, Berlin 1919, 236
8. Cf I. Howard Marshall, The Gospel of Luke, Exeter 1978, 406 suggests a certain syntactical awkwardness in favour of such an omission.
9. Cf W. Grundmann, Das Evangelium nach Markus, THKNT Berlin 1968, ad loc
10. ibid, 83
11. Cf the valuable discussion of Grundmann, op.cit. 206