

There is an interesting aspect to today's Gospel that needs to be seen in context.

Early in Chapter 9 St. Mark told us about the Transfiguration on Mt Tabor, and how after coming down from the mountain, Jesus, with Peter, James and John, were met by a distraught father who asked Jesus if he could drive out a demon from his son, who had repeatedly tried to kill himself. The father told Jesus that he had asked the other disciples, who had not gone up the mountain with Jesus, if they could drive that demon out, but they couldn't, so Jesus was his last hope. Jesus did what he was asked to do, and father and son went home happy.

But the disciples were puzzled. When Jesus had sent them off to preach the good news in the villages round about, he had given them the power to drive out demons, and they had been able to expel demons by the cartload, as it were. Yet here they had not been able to do a thing. Why was that so? Jesus answered them that this kind of demon could only be cast out through prayer and fasting.

But now, almost at the end of the same Chapter, in today's Gospel you have this absolute stranger who had no connection with them whatsoever casting out demons in Jesus' name.

Can you see the power play at work? They have been noted as unsuccessful exorcists, but this man, who was not even one of them, does so successfully in Jesus' name. The come-down, the indignity, the fear of being supplanted is all too real, and they want it stopped, so they won't feel diminished. But Jesus won't have it, - he tells them to broaden their vision, and to leave the stranger in peace: "Anyone who is not against us is for us." In fact, he goes further. He tells them that anyone who, in his name, gives as little as a cup of water to someone who thirsts, will not lose his reward.

We have here a very telling Gospel, therefore, that does not allow of any elitism or division between them and us. We are charged, compelled even, to look for the good in people, not for their failings.

It's a lesson which both we, and the Church, find very hard to learn. The divisions that exist between our many Christian Churches mainly concern points of doctrine, ways in which we understand the teachings of Christ. But our primary link with Jesus is not how we understand his teaching, - it is in how we grow in our relationship with him. The closer we are united to

him in a relationship of love, which recognises how all of us are brothers and sisters to Jesus, the better we'll understand his teaching too. Our relationship with Jesus, with God, begins in the heart, not in the head!

Today's Gospel, therefore, invites us to be open to others, to allow ourselves to be enriched by them, and in the process create a world where harmony, not division prevail. That can be quite an ask in our world where individualism and self-sufficiency are touted as important values, yet, what marriage would succeed if these were the primary values that husband and wife strove for? The same goes for society at large. Only as interdependent beings, who know our worth as God's sons and daughters, drawn into one family, will we learn to appreciate the gifts we are to each other, and the gifts we bring to the communities of which we are part.

Do we really want to deny the gift of liberation from evil which the absolute stranger brought about in Jesus' name.

The same theme is repeated in the Social Justice Statement put forward by the Australian Bishops Conference today.

A place to call home, making a home for everyone in our land, places before us the question of homelessness, the challenge of the haves and have-nots.

Most of here this evening have a home of our own, or have a place we can afford to rent, but 160,000 people around Australia are not so lucky, and survive sleeping rough on the street, in cars, or couch-surfing wherever they can find a spot. The vast majority of these do so, not by choice, but by circumstance. They would much prefer a place to call home, a place that offers security, an address, and where they have access to the services we take for granted.

We all have a right to a roof over our heads, but that brings with it a duty for those who do have, to work, sacrifice and campaign for those who are not so lucky. For some of us that can mean sharing our home; for others, who have the means to do so, to build homes or units which those who are poorer can afford, and where that is not possible, to lobby the government to provide sufficient community housing. We all have a role to play in helping provide a home for all. It is what Christ calls us to do, where he urges us to love one another as I have loved you.