

SERMON PREACHED BY Fr BILL WILSON AT ST BARTHOLOMEW THE GREAT:  
SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 27 2015.

The people with Moses were so anxious to ensure that prophesying took place only under carefully controlled conditions, that when Eldad and Medad started doing so they called on Moses to stop them. John couldn't bear the thought of others driving devils out in the name of Jesus. He wasn't one of us so we tried to stop him.

Already the jealousy, the desire for control. For them the point was that they were given something to the exclusion of others.

John and the other disciples didn't like the idea of the Lord working through those who were not specifically his followers. Jesus says an amazing and scandalous thing: *Anyone who is not against us is for us.* A call to the Church to recall that it is God who chooses, God who acts, and the Spirit blows where he wills, and cannot be confined either by the structures of an institution or by the worthiness of the recipient. The failure to see this is as old a religion itself, because we all seem to have an irresistible desire to claim for ourselves an exclusive share in the favour of the God. A share which excludes others.

Those who put Exodus together clearly saw beyond this: *Are you jealous on my account?* says Moses. *If only all the Lord's people were prophets, and the Lord had given them his spirit!*

And the coming of Jesus of Nazareth confirms once and for all that the qualification for receiving the love and grace of God is not belonging to a particular nation or tribe, but simply being human. As God in Jesus takes on our human nature, so he confirms that we are made in God's image, and that there is no human creature in whom God does **not** dwell.

If this is so, then there is **bound** to be common ground. It is necessary to say all of this in order to emphasise that revelation is God's self-revelation, God's gift and discretion.

Having said all of this I have to say also that it is a **good** thing to belong to the Church, but not a good thing because it affords us a privilege that is not available to others.

So why belong? We are called into relationship with God, to love and serve the one who created us and gives himself for us. The one who opens his heart to us and awaits only our response. By belonging to the Church we are brought into a framework where that relationship can be nurtured and find its proper expression in community with other believers. If Christianity were merely a matter of assent to certain abstract principles this would not be necessary. Our Christianity focusses on a person, and concerns our relationship with that person. Insofar as it facilitates that relationship it is useful and proper for us to belong to the Church.

If this is not so, then the Church is no earthly use. Within this context it does not really matter whether there is truth in other religions or not. **We** happen to have been called into the Church. And within that context we are called upon to respond to that call. But this does not preclude the possibility, the likelihood, even, that the Spirit of God is at work elsewhere, **even** in other religions, as well as in other sectors of the Christian Church. God, God's Spirit, dwells in the Church, but also fills the whole world.

It would be so much better, would it not, if belonging to the Church completely circumscribed the operation of the love of God and the activity of God's Spirit. But there is no evidence for this, compelling as the thought may be. It is certainly clear from the Gospel

that Jesus was anxious to emphasise that there were people in the world even at that time doing his work and yet not part of the official accredited structure.

None of this means that our belonging to the Church is of less significance. In fact, the importance of our membership of the Church is increased, because we go into it with our eyes open, not expecting that thereby we shall obtain some privilege not accessible to others, but seeking the fulfilment of a relationship with God in a community to which we feel called. It is vocation that is central to our belonging to the Church, not simply the guarantee of authentic ministry or even eternal bliss. We simply cannot recommend the Christian faith on the basis of its possession of a monopoly of the truth. We can recommend it on the basis of the quality of community life that it brings, and because it provides the context for our nurture and growth in the knowledge and love of God. The God who created us, who redeems and sustains us, does not need the protection, the exclusiveness of our system, and cannot indeed be confined by it. But God works in and through it.

In the sacraments, supremely in the Eucharist, we are drawn into the life of God and we feed on Christ. From this centre springs all that we are as a community and all that we have to offer to others. In and through this community God dwells with us here on earth. But that is by no means the end of the story. God is much greater than the Church. And we have to take seriously the honest search and the love of people who would in no sense call themselves Christians. We have also to take seriously countless thousands of people whose route to spiritual fulfilment is different from ours.

The Spirit of God blows where he wills, in ways that are not under our control or even available to our scrutiny. Even in the remotest parts of the earth, in the furthest corners of human consciousness the Spirit blows with the warmth of God's love. If we are going to avoid the negativity either of Joshua or the first disciples of Jesus we have to ensure that the Spirit is allowed to blow freely in our lives, so that we can recognise that the one who made all that is needs no defence.