

Sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Sydney 27<sup>th</sup> September 2015 by Rev Ross Smith.  
Lectionary: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50.

## **Whose Side are You On?**

Welcome today all who have come to share in this celebration of life from wherever you have come in terms of distance, ethnic, cultural and religious background. Our nation has traditionally welcomed immigrants, been enriched in culture and productivity.

We have also found that being tolerant, being receptive, being open, has brought us positive gains. Hospitality brings gains to both receiver and giver.

Some of us have received recognition for our contributions to the life of this nation and particular communities. We know what is it to work for the common good and to acknowledge the positive qualities in others. Being respectful, honouring others' talents and being generous creates a corresponding response.

One of the key themes found in most religions and philosophies is the theme of hospitality. Apart from scriptural texts enjoining followers to be hospitable to the stranger, we sing of it in national anthems which welcome immigrants.

Most countries are made up of influxes of people, some of whom have been refugees, who have come from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds at different times and over an extended period. Sometimes the influx has come about because of invasions or colonising.

These influxes may have good outcomes, such as an extended gene pool, and a recognition that diversity of styles and attitudes is a gift rather than a problem.

They can lead to a recognition of the fact that we come to know ourselves better if we encounter ones who are other than we are. Self-knowledge is an acknowledged good. Knowledge of another shows that we respect and honour those who are not like us. That is a good and necessary thing.

When we look at what others are doing and believing, it has become a commonplace for us to be urged to be tolerant. However, being tolerant is not to be mushy and indiscriminating, accepting everything as a good.

It is obvious that some things are not acceptable, especially those things that are racist, sexist and exclusive. They are unacceptable because these attitudes do not give to others what we would want for ourselves, namely respect and honour and generosity.

We have an account in the Book of Esther of a king who is moved by Esther on behalf of the people of Israel to spare them from destruction. The book recounts attempted genocide and also a deadly attack on those who had attempted genocide.

The intrigues and refusals to be tolerant in the book of Esther remind us of the turmoil in the Middle East and Afghanistan and North Africa and how huge numbers are trying to flee from sectarian conflicts into safe havens.

There are places in South-Eastern Europe where the collapse of Yugoslavia into ethnic enclaves, intolerance and bitter memories of past massacres have resulted in recent massacres.

We have looked back on huge wars in the twentieth century, and hoped: "Surely we have learned something about the need for discussion, dialogue and compromise?" But we grow impatient and want to force our own solution.

Whose side are you on? This is a question that makes us become more discriminating. In the gospel of Mark the disciples have a problem about a wandering exorcist who is casting out demons using the name of Jesus.

They want Jesus to condemn the man's actions, but Jesus says "He who is not against us is for us." The "us" here is the disciples.

They, like us, want to say: "What about the outcomes of this supposed healing? Is everything done by this alleged healer to be condoned? Doesn't the question of what the healer believes matter as much as the good he appears to be doing? What are his credentials?"

History teaches that beliefs do matter. Terrible things have been done by people who sincerely believed that what they did was right. Wrong thinking can lead to chaotic, miserable living. Thinking affects acting. Beliefs link to behaviour.

In a search for a way through the problem of tolerance and intolerance, a clue can be found in another gospel, that of Matthew 12:30 where Jesus says "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters."

Perhaps the important thing is not get your head straight on right doctrine or right theology but to be with Jesus. And how do we do that? It means that we get on the side of one who matches words with deeds. One who sees that humanity has one origin, one source and destination. We can refer to this reality by the term "Ground of Being."

According to our culture or faith background we give different names to that Ground of Being, or we abstain from naming the sacred Ground of Being. But we know we all exist in that Ground of Being and are therefore linked with each other.

We are brothers and sisters of the one family. So we can say we have one Parent.

This is where belief is critical. If we truly believe that, then we will honour, respect and behave generously to our brothers and sisters. We will be able to relate to each other, affirm each other, accept our different understandings and come to rejoice in whatever good works are being done.

We will also be able to name the bad deeds, such as racism, sexism, ageism, the pursuit of one's own benefit at the expense of other people and so on.

There is another account we can go to on "words and deeds" in Matthew (21:8-32). A story about a father and his two sons. Both are told to go and plough a field. One says, "Yeah, sure thing! I'll do it right away! But these are just words, because he does not go.

The other, a rebellious sort says: "No way, Forget it! I've got more important things to do than plough your miserable field. Get someone else to do the job. But later, when the father looks up from what he is doing, he sees the second son hard at work, doing his father's bidding.

We know which one did the will of his father. His words were wrong, but his actions were right. The challenge for us is to have both: Right words and right actions. A very human struggle.

This brings us back to where we began: To be hospitable is to respect and to honour, to be generous and to be sincere. It is to welcome the stranger, the one who is different.

It is arrogant of a church or any faith community, or indeed any secular group, to deny the gifts and charisma of people outside a given fellowship. Many healing activities going on outside our various groups are a witness to the work of the Spirit and are for the collective good.

Many a good word comes from people who would never darken the door of church, temple or other holy meeting place.

Let us be open to receiving the gifts of those who are part of our own networks and communities. Let us also receive gladly the contributions toward healing that come from outside our usual circles. Let us be radically inclusive!