

**“Whoever is not against us is for us.” (Mark 9:40)**

The Gospel from Mark 9:38-50 offers a deeply significant lesson, not only for the early Christian community but for us today. Jesus' declaration, "Whoever is not against us is for us," comes at a time when his disciples were struggling with questions of inclusion and belonging. They were concerned about someone outside their group performing acts in Jesus' name. This is something we might recognize today—a concern about who belongs and who is "outside."

In the context of the early Christians, living under the pressures of persecution and struggling to define their community, Jesus' words carried profound meaning. They invited the disciples, and all those who followed him, to move beyond rigid definitions of who was considered a "true" follower. Jesus pointed out that God's work could be done by anyone advancing the cause of love and justice, even if they did not belong to the immediate group of disciples.

Today, Church leaders from various traditions echo this same message. They challenge us to expand our understanding of who we serve and who we consider our companions in the mission of love.

Archbishop Joris Vercammen, on January 11, 2020, during his retirement service, emphasized that we should go beyond our boundaries in the service of those in need. His words reflect the universal call to love and serve others, regardless of our differences.

Similarly, Archbishop Justin Welby, on October 6, 2021, during his visit to the Vatican, spoke about the importance of solidarity across faiths, particularly in addressing the pressing challenges we face today, like climate change. He reminded us that collaboration beyond traditional lines is essential for fulfilling God's mission in the world.

And just recently, on September 13, 2024, during his visit to Singapore, Pope Francis made a statement that sparked much discussion. He declared that all religions can be paths to God when they lead people toward love, justice, and compassion. While this message stirred controversy, it also reflects the inclusive approach that Jesus demonstrated in today's Gospel: the recognition that anyone advancing love and justice is doing God's work, even if they do not belong to our immediate circle.

While these leaders beautifully articulate the Gospel's message of inclusivity, there is a challenge that remains. These ideals are not always seen in action on the ground. Divisions—whether based on religious affiliation, social status, or personal beliefs—still persist within our communities, both religious and secular. Too often, we draw lines between who is "in" and who is "out," who deserves our support and who does not.

The truth is, while these Church leaders speak eloquently about unity and service, their words must inspire more tangible change. It is not enough to acknowledge these values in speeches—they must be felt in how we treat others in our daily lives. How do we

embrace those who are different from us? How do we work with people outside our immediate communities for the common good? Are we truly living out the spirit of Jesus' words, "Whoever is not against us is for us," in practical and concrete ways?

The challenge for us, then, is to ensure that these teachings are not just confined to speeches or sermons but are lived out on the ground. Like the early Christians who received the Gospel of Mark, we too are faced with internal and external pressures that can make it difficult to live out this radical inclusivity. Yet, Jesus' message is clear—the mission of God is far too great to be limited by our human boundaries. We are called to recognize and celebrate the good being done by others, even if they come from different backgrounds or traditions.

So, I ask us all: How can we move from words to action? How can we, as followers of Christ today, go beyond our words and engage in concrete actions of solidarity? Whether by reaching out to those in need, collaborating with people of different faiths, or working to build peace and justice in our communities, we must live out the Gospel's call to embrace all who are working toward the common good.

It is time to move beyond just acknowledging these values. It is time to act, ensuring that the spirit of inclusivity, solidarity, and compassion is felt and seen in every corner of our world.

Here in our congregations—Die Kathariner and the Catherinians—we have already begun this collaboration through our bilingual services. I remember how joyful I felt during Easter Eve, when we celebrated together with the Protestants from Leonhardskirche. I envision that the day will come when we go beyond these Sunday services, that we will engage in shared ministries—not just for our congregations but in service to those outside our immediate communities. We will move beyond our boundaries, beyond our faith traditions, beyond our doctrines, and together, live out the truth: "Doctrine divides, but service unites."

The timeless message of Mark 9:38-50, along with the recent words of Archbishop Vercammen, Archbishop Welby, and Pope Francis, calls us to transcend boundaries and work together for a better world. It is up to each of us to ensure that these calls to unity and service are not just spoken but lived in meaningful and transformative ways, both within the Church and beyond.

Let us go forward in unity, knowing that the mission of God knows no boundaries, no divisions. Amen.