

Thought for the week
26th Sunday of the Year (B)
30th September 2018

Elitism – social, political and, alas, spiritual – is one of the scourges of twenty-first-century life. The casual side-lining of other people just because they are ‘not one of us’ is all too easy through the misuse of social media; the suspicion often conferred on refugees and asylum seekers, and the failure to treat all people with dignity and respect, also speak of attitudes of exclusivism.

In the spiritual life, and the life of the Church, such attitudes are also all too frequently evident, when a particular group believes that they ‘own’ the truth. How often have we disparaged views that differ from our own? I know I have done so; I have also been on the receiving end of such treatment – and it is painful.

Both Moses and Jesus remind us that the Spirit is not limited by our human or ecclesial structures, but blows where it will. Moses longs for the Spirit to fall on everyone, so all may prophesy; he does not jealously guard his own vision, and warns the elders against exclusivism.

The ninth chapter of Mark’s Gospel is one in which Jesus is educating his disciples; he takes three of them up the mountain to witness the Transfiguration; this is followed by the disciples’ failed attempt to cure a boy; when they then go on to argue among themselves about which of them is the greatest, he explains to them that there is no place for a ‘top dog’ among his followers – yet they continue blindly (but perhaps understandably) to cling on to a sense that because they have been chosen, they are the spiritual elite to the exclusion of all others.

Jesus speaks up for ‘these little ones who have faith’, warning the disciples not to be a stumbling block (or a scandal, as the original Greek expresses it) by not recognising that the ‘little ones’ too have access to the Holy Spirit.

Last weekend we heard how St John of the Cross was imprisoned by his own Order for apparently no longer being ‘one of us’ – yet today he is revered by the Church (including the Carmelites) as a saint, who was inspired by the Holy Spirit to reform the Carmelite Order. And some sixty years later, the Venerable Mary Ward was imprisoned by the Inquisition for daring to found a new Order for women who would be free to do active apostolic work in the world rather than being enclosed in a convent – yet today her holiness and radical vision are recognised, and her Cause for Beatification is under way.

As we go about our business this week, perhaps we can think about the ways in which we sometimes fall into the trap of not recognising the Spirit at work in those who are ‘not one of us’. Jesus is quite clear that we do so at our peril!