

Group identity is important in most human societies. It comes naturally to divide people into 'them' and 'us'. In the village we distinguish between incomers and the 'true' villagers whose families have always lived here.

Here in Wales we divide on the basis of language, and between church and chapel. But the 'them and us' tendency is not only a rural phenomenon. It can be seen in city gangs and in gentlemen's clubs, or in the supporters of Everton and Liverpool, Rangers and Celtic. And it can be seen in our churches: "I am of Paul and I am of Apollos" has plenty of modern parallels.

Cliques are part of human nature. However, like many other aspects of human nature, they are challenged by the gospel. Take, for instance, the story of the 'strange exorcist' (Mark 9:38-41). Jesus was well-known as an exorcist, and he commissioned his disciples to share this ministry (Mark 6:7,13). But in a world which was familiar with demon-possession there were already other exorcists around, as Jesus himself recognised (Matthew 12:27). Given Jesus' high profile in this area, it is hardly surprising that other Jewish exorcists decided to get on the bandwagon (for a later example see Acts 19:13-16). And so Jesus' disciples came across a man who was casting out demons in Jesus' name "and we stopped him, because he was not one of us." Well you would, wouldn't you?

But, as usual, the disciples had got it wrong. "Don't stop him," said Jesus. If he is using my name, he is not an enemy. "Whoever is not against us is on our side."

How about that for a subversive slogan? It undercuts at one stroke many

of our defensive group identity criteria. Above all, it is inclusive rather than exclusive. Like the interestingly similar yet different saying in Matthew 12:30, "Whoever is not with me is against me", it recognises no middle ground. But what a world of difference there is between the attitude which regards the glass as half full and that which regards it as half empty.

There are churches which operate on the exclusive principle. Anyone who does not conform to the group norms of behaviour and of explicit doctrinal formulation is 'not one of us', and must seek their spiritual home elsewhere. But such churches are more often found in the suburbs than in rural society. In a village, especially one where there is only one active place of worship, such an attitude is hard to maintain, and the minister soon discovers that there is a deep fund of goodwill and tacit support outside the worshipping congregation.

There are many who are 'not against us'. They may not use the approved formulae, and may be more often seen at the fete and even the PCC meeting than at Sunday worship, but on Jesus' principle as expressed in Mark's story, they are 'on our side'.

Let's welcome them on that basis, and build on their good will, rather than dismissing them as 'not one of us'. ■

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**Not one
of us
– on
'belonging'
in the rural
church**