

Donnybrook
23 February 2022

Welcome

Today's Gospel is unsettling, reassuring and inviting.

Steps

It is unsettling. Already in Jesus' day, the followers tended to become a closed group, resistant to "outsiders." We are familiar with that after 2000 years of history. The old tag, outside the church there is no salvation," is quite ancient, going back to Cyprian of Carthage. In the 1950s church, an American priest Fr Feeney was a very strict teacher that only Catholics would be saved. But even that far back, it was unacceptable to the Vatican and Fr Feeney was excommunicated for his troubles – an ironic punishment for him. But groups often set up barriers, probably clarify identity and possible to bolster power.

It is also reassuring that even those who knew Jesus went astray very early on. We have more in common with them than we might think!

The response of Jesus is very liberating: whoever is not against us is for us. As a pal of mine used to say, double negatives are not without their power! Whoever is not against us is for us...we are not in competition.

Such a generous reaction invites us to look around and see what the spirit has been doing, for example, in other churches – perhaps we can learn. In the twentieth century, there was one clear example of how the Spirit spoke first to the Protestant churches. In 1910, there was a Protestant mission convention in Edinburgh. One topic was the divided witness of the different reformed churches – thus was born the ecumenical movement. The Catholic Church was officially highly resistant – until Vatican II. The embrace of ecumenism since is very welcome – but it is also a recognition that the Spirit was acting or at least was heard first of all beyond the boundaries of the Roman church.

Conclusion

Two practical reflections come to mind. Firstly, what else has the Spirit been saying to the reformed churches that we have yet to hear? And second, our synodal process has the task of listening to all, precisely because the Spirit can surprise. 6