

Twenty Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time - September 27, 2015

Readings: Numbers 11:25-29; James 5:1-6; Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

Our world is a challenging world and in this world we are all called to be prophets of God. We are invited to announce the good news of God's deep love for each one of us. It is indeed important that we manifest this call in our behavior and daily activities and more importantly through our words. A prophet is one who stands for the values of God against the values of the world. Today the population in the world has crossed seven billion and nearly half the population does not have sufficient food for its sustenance. Some people live in misery, being sick and homeless, with no one to take care of them. While the scientists look for solutions such as population control, the church sees the solution in proper personal development. All the followers of Jesus we have to play an important role to reduce the hardship and pain in the world of today. Our liturgy of today invites us to understand the meaning of discipleship and the need of our fidelity to the Lord as his chosen persons. The scripture today reminds us of our noble heritage and of our duty to embrace our traditions and pass them forward to others. In the Gospel Jesus articulates the broad principles of discipleship. He says that anyone who is not against us is for us. What is important is the service of humanity. In the first reading Moses refuses to interfere with people doing God's work. He wishes that God would grant the Holy Spirit to everyone and continue that good work in others. In the second reading James addresses those who have piled up the ill-gotten goods. Both their wealth and they themselves are doomed to destruction. He gives warning to those who have made gods out of their riches.

In the First Reading of today we hear God directing Moses to choose seventy helpers and bring them to the tent where the Ark of God was kept. God now takes some of the Spirit of Moses and bestows it on the seventy. Since they share the same spirit as it was on Moses, God's purpose here seems as if to teach Moses that he should be proclaiming the word of God with the spirit rather than go on complaining about his burden as the leader of the community. The setting of the reading is in the context of people complaining while on the way to the Promised Land. God had given them Manna and promised a land flowing with milk and honey. But some misguided people keep on reminding others of the food in Egypt and influence the community against God and Moses. Hence Moses complains to God about these people. The seventy of the elders chosen from among the people by God are brought together to share the burden of the people along with Moses which he would not bear by himself. These persons would share the responsibility

with him. They would be God's representatives on earth and certainly assist in the ministry of leading the people to the Promised Land. Moses seems to have learnt the lesson. He is no longer focused on himself but instead wishes God would bestow the divine spirit on all the people. And so he will not interfere with Eldad and Medad who serve God and continue his work by prophesying in the camp.

In the Second Reading of today James gives a vivid description and strong denunciation of the unscrupulous rich. As he looks round he finds that there are Christians who have put their trust in riches. James here enumerates a number of injustices perpetrated by the rich. Every moment of the day, their minds are set on and obsessed with the worldly desire of making more money. While depriving their workmen of their justly earned wages, they have fattened their hearts on what did not belong to them. Worse still, because of the position of power which their ill-gotten gains secured for them, they are responsible for the deaths of innocent people. The cries of these laborers and innocent people pound the very eardrums of God. However when they come to judgment the treasures they have laid up will be used as evidence against them and will bring their eternal condemnation. Their misdeeds will call upon destruction upon themselves. All their wealth and the money they made will not stand for them in the moment of need. He tells them that their miseries are coming on them which will make them weep and howl but not with repentance. Therefore he warns all Christian converts to beware of the danger of concentrating on the accumulation of earthly wealth particularly acquired through injustice to the poor and the helpless people.

The Gospel of today begins with the issue of how authority is mediated in the Christian community. Mark presents an incident of the exorcist who was not a follower of Jesus or a disciple and yet could work miracles in the name of Jesus. The Apostles did not approve of this man and John who belonged to the inner circle tells Jesus how they tried to stop him and point out to him that they alone are the chosen ones and not he. Jesus also had sent the disciples on a mission where they had worked the miracles and had healed the people and cast out devils. They had received the praises for their good work. Not only did they enjoy some reflected glory in being disciples of Jesus but, through his authority, they themselves were doing some of the very same things. They would have been growing in popularity and public exposure and it looked very much that they were slowly getting into a streak of vanity and arrogance. They could feel that their privileged position is no more secure. That person who was not of their group was found casting out devils. He was not just driving out evil spirits but was doing so in the name of Jesus. So they tried to put a stop to him. Their concern was not that the person had done an

exorcism in the name of Jesus but that he did not belong to their group. Here we carefully listen to the reply of Jesus who tells them that they are not to stop him. He adds that if someone works a miracle in his name is not likely to speak evil of Jesus. The power of exorcism is always from God. The man in question was clearly not only using the name of Jesus, he was also producing results. He was successful in his exorcisms and people were being made free.

Jesus makes use of this opportunity to enunciate an important principle of discipleship: "Whoever is not against us is for us." One does not necessarily have to belong to any particular group to effectively evoke the name of Jesus. Anyone who would have the desire, ability and faith to do so could not be in any way opposed to Jesus. Such a person is not to be prohibited from acting in the name of Jesus. There can be a silent disciple and also an active disciple, indicating that salvation is always universal and it belongs to everyone. God can and does use anyone to do his work. The Church has no monopoly on God's work or on God's truth or on God's love or on God's power to heal and reconcile. The work of the Kingdom is not confined only to the baptized, although it is certainly their special work. Outside of the Catholic Church there are thousands who are doing the work of God in a spirit of total sincerity and commitment. Some of them are Christians of other denominations; some are Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims or animists; some are atheists or agnostics or secular humanists or nothing in particular. Wherever we see God's work being done we should give our support and be ready to work together with such people. This principle evokes a very broad spectrum for defining discipleship. The disciples of Jesus for all wrong reasons want discipleship defined narrowly. Jesus for all the right reasons defines it very broadly. The great Charles de Foucauld had this spirit as did Mother Teresa and they could see the presence of God everywhere.

The focus switches in the last part of the passage to a severe warning against anyone who causes these little ones to stumble in their faith. They are addressed specially to those baptized persons. The phrase Little Ones refers to those who belong to Jesus. These are not just children but also the weakest members of the community: weak perhaps because of their young age, or their lack of learning, ordinary people, simple or those with low position in society, or those being morally weak and are easily misled. Anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have faith would be better thrown into the sea with a great millstone round his neck. The word 'obstacle' here used can easily be translated as 'scandal'. The Greek word means something that trips a person and causes him to fall. The language is harsh and violent in order to make its point. It is not to be

taken literally but rather metaphorically. Those who consciously and deliberately become serious stumbling blocks to those who belong to Jesus are destined for Gehenna. This was the valley of Hinnom which ran south-west of Jerusalem. At one time it had been a place of terrible atrocities and had ended up a smoldering wide garbage dump that became a symbol for the place of condemnation. Anything would be better than ending up in Gehenna. Jesus is saying that it is an absolutely terrible thing to be the cause of a person being led astray and away from Christ and the Gospel. Notice that Jesus is not saying this to a general audience but to his own disciples and warns them that they should never be a stumbling block to their brothers in religion.

The last part of the Gospel tells us be aware of how we can become a stumbling block to ourselves: Let our hands, feet and eyes not be guilty of the terrible abuses, the truly scandalous behavior. As we have in the Sermon on the Mount, here Jesus says that "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell." We all know our human weaknesses and tendencies. Knowing them, by the grace of God we should apply our spiritual minds to overcome such weaknesses and tendencies. Here Jesus instructs his disciples that they must avoid what causes them to sin. They should keep away from those opportunities that seek to destroy their souls. It is the sin of being judgmental that ruins a human person. Jesus calls us not only a good person for ourselves but also we are called to reach out, to love, to be just to others, to be fully free with and for others, to be truly brother or sister. We are also called to be the prophets in today's world, to proclaim in words and actions that the Source of all love, justice, freedom and solidarity with others is a God who loves, who forgives and who wants all to share in a life that is enriched on every level.

This leads us to the fact that our Christian faith is essentially apostolic. It is of its essence that the Good News about Jesus be widely proclaimed in the most public places. And this is a responsibility not just of a few leaders in the church but of every single baptized person. So Jesus told his disciples that if anyone gives them a cup of water to drink just because they belong to Christ, then they will most certainly not lose their reward. He emphasized on the word anyone indicating that it is the responsibility of all to serve and do his work. Such an act, simple though it is, done by "anyone" in a spirit of love and compassion is a truly Christ-like act and Jesus says he will recognize it. It would be possible for a person who is strong in the faith to behave in such a way that a weaker member would be seriously harmed in his following of Christ. St Paul was very much aware of this and was particularly sensitive about how he behaved with new converts, especially converts

from Judaism. With such people he would not do certain things which would shock or make them feel uncomfortable even though he personally knew it was perfectly correct to behave in that way. Let us reflect upon our position towards the Lord Jesus and His Church that He has instituted on earth. We seek with all our souls, our minds, our bodies and our strength to humbly serve and obey the Lord Jesus in the Body of Christ by shining as a light in the world, and enjoy the hope that leads to eternal joy and peace in the Kingdom of God.

Any person who has the riches is to use them for the benefit of others. When we examine the words of Jesus in today's Gospel we realize that our actions are more important than a simple claim to follow Jesus. As the followers of Jesus we are to bring blessings and privileges to others. The life and love we receive from God is intimately connected to our call to be prophets and members of the body of Christ. Today's readings emphasize the necessity to do the works of the Lord in order to remain filled with the Holy Spirit. We too, unfortunately, could become enemies of the Disciples of Christ. For example, if we are jealous of someone who has received graces or gifts that we do not have, we then become enemies of the disciples of the Lord. If we desire the spiritual goods of others, instead of praising God for them, then we are similar to those whose hand or foot or eye is an occasion of sin. So we must implore the Lord to deliver us from this disordered attachment, from this desire that has not been placed in our heart by God himself. And in order that we might firmly detach ourselves from this fatal desire, Jesus personally threatens us with the fire of hell, an eternal fire, a fire that never dies out, for God's judgment is final. We pray to Mary our Mother to show us the path. When we receive the Eucharist today, let it be for us the effective remedy that allows us to always be turned toward the Lord, faithful in his service and respectful of the gifts he deigns to grant to whomever he wishes.

On a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for them, went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Some of those who were saved and various others in the surrounding area wanted to become associated with the station and gave of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little life-saving station grew. Some of the members of the life-saving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. Accidents did not take place daily. Now the life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving

missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. When the accidents took place most found it a nuisance. So some revolted and separated themselves to start a new hut and went to save people. Their popularity brought some more to their group. Today after many years a visitor can see many lifesaving clubs on the sea shore. The ship wrecks do take place but no one really cares for them.

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