

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading: (Numbers 11.25-29)

Openness to the Spirit

This is a curious little scene, and the corresponding scene in the gospel is no less curious. It is part of the story of Israel's wanderings in the desert.

Moses' father-in-law wisely suggests to Moses to appoint assistants to deal with all the complaints, quarrels and lawsuits among the people. So some of the divine spirit of judgment which was on Moses descends upon these 70 elders. However, there seems to have been some sort of irregularity in the appointment of Eldad and Medad, which leads to objections even by Joshua, Moses' faithful servant and successor. Nevertheless, the message finally given is that the Spirit of God is to be welcomed wherever it may be found.

It is a valuable reminder that the Spirit of God is greater than human regulations and crosses human boundaries. The wisdom of God may be found beyond the organization of the Church. Genuine holiness may be found also beyond the limits of the Church. We must respect the freedom of God to give what he wills where he wills it, and we must be prepared to learn from those who do not belong to our own tradition.

Question:

Is holiness to be found beyond the limits of the Church?

Second reading: (James 5.1-6)

The Dangers of Wealth

This final reading from the Letter of James is a denunciation of the selfishness of the rich in the style of the Old Testament prophets, with a wealth of daunting imagery. This strength of expression is somewhat surprising in the early decades of Christianity, for it seems that wealth was not one of the temptations to deflect the early Christians. There do seem to have been rich Christians in the community at Corinth, but, on the whole, the Christians seem to have belonged to the lower classes and slaves.

James, the presumed author of the Letter, was the leader of the Jerusalem community. The Church at Jerusalem seems to have been in chronic financial difficulty: Paul was asked to help it out, and took a collection from the gentile Churches up to Jerusalem. In the early second century the pagan Celsus denounces Christians as ignorant and ill educated.

However, these warnings are still relevant today. It is still tempting to ease cash flow by postponing payment of bills! The power and immunity given by wealth can still have a corrosive influence that blinds the owners to the needs and susceptibilities of others.

Question:

Is wealth necessarily a distraction from our true goals?

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Gospel:

(Mark 9.38-43, 45, 47-48)

Helps and Hindrances

The gospel gives us a rich insight into two entirely separate matters, for this part of Mark is a collection of sayings about discipleship. The first little story tells us that we must accept good wherever we can find it, not only in our own group and where we expect it to be. It is the same lesson that appears in the first reading. The Spirit of God is at work not only in Catholics, not only in Christians, not only even in people of faith.

As Vatican II teaches so strongly, the Holy Spirit is at work even in those who are seeking the Kingdom under signs and symbols. They can be better people and better Christians than those who sit back and do nothing, secure in the belief that they are members of the Church!

Second, the gospel gives some dire sayings about 'scandals'. The word so translated means not stories about evil people or evil doings, but a trip stone which makes people fall over. The dire sayings are about leading other believers into evil and about the trip stones in ourselves, the disordered desires, that lead us into evil. Jesus' sayings here must be taken with the utmost seriousness, but perhaps not literally to the extent of self-mutilation.

Question:

Can you name a really good person whom you admire who is not a Catholic or even a Christian? What do you admire about this person?
