

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

cf. John 17:17b, 17a

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Your word, O Lord, is truth;
consecrate us in the truth.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48; L137B

At that time, John said to Jesus,
"Teacher, we saw someone driving
out demons in your name,
and we tried to prevent him because
he does not follow us."

Jesus replied, "Do not prevent him.
There is no one who performs a
mighty deed in my name
who can at the same time speak ill
of me.

For whoever is not against us is for
us.

Anyone who gives you a cup of water
to drink
because you belong to Christ,
amen, I say to you, will surely not lose
his reward.

"Whoever causes one of these little ones
who believe in me to sin,
it would be better for him if a great
millstone
were put around his neck
and he were thrown into the sea.

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.
It is better for you to enter into life maimed
than with two hands to go into Gehenna,
into the unquenchable fire.

And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off.
It is better for you to enter into life crippled
than with two feet to be thrown into
Gehenna.

And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it
out.

Better for you to enter into the kingdom of
God with one eye
than with two eyes to be thrown into
Gehenna,
where 'their worm does not die, and the
fire is not quenched.'"

Reflecting on the Gospel

In grade school most of us learned about "tattletales," those fellow grade-schoolers who were so eager to impress the teacher or another adult that they "tattled" on their fellow students. "Joey didn't do what you asked him to do!" "Mirta called me a name!" "Jorge is eating the cookies!" But too often the tattletales did not receive the response they expected. Often it was, "Nobody likes a tattletale."

Today the disciples, in their continuing streak of misunderstanding, come to Jesus with some news. It's as though they are tattling, "We saw someone doing something in your name, but he's not in our group so we stopped him." Jesus responds with the equivalent of, "No one likes a tattletale." He then makes a claim that can be described as "big tent" Christianity, in saying that "whoever is not against us is for us." The double negative "not against" is significant, and seems to be a rather low bar. If simply not being against is the equivalent of being "for" there seems to be hope!

Yet, this rather low-bar admonition is followed immediately by a stern and disturbing warning: Causing a little one to sin is worthy of death. What then follows are a series of prophetic hyperbole intended to make the point that the kingdom of God is worth any price. Lopping off a body part that causes one to sin is better than losing eternal life. The early church recognized these commands concerning self-maiming as hyperbole and did

not take them literally. These are warnings to sever any relationship that causes sin. The kingdom of God is the ultimate prize worth any price.

Living the Paschal Mystery

We can be so eager to define who is in and who is outside of the group. There seems to be something in our DNA or evolution that wants to create and protect the tribe, the clan, the group. We have heard it said, "If you're not with us, you're against us." This clear demarcation is intended, among other things, to rally the group, and to warn others against harming the group. But Jesus does not draw the lines so starkly. For him, "whoever is not against us is for us." That leaves a rather large group!

For Jesus, the group is expansive, and we should be too. In the United States, not many people are actively against Christians. To be sure, there are parts of the world where being Christian can be a death sentence. But that happens only rarely, if ever, in developed parts of the world.

Rather than look for enemies, and seek to find those who are against us, Jesus tells his disciples essentially that by their actions you shall know them. If someone is not part of the group but is still performing the actions of the members of the group, that person is with us. The disciples' continuing streak of misunderstanding is met with Jesus' teaching them values contrary to their expectations once again.



Focusing the Gospel

Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

As we have seen throughout Mark's gospel, the people of Jesus' time held great stock in the existence of demons: whatever mental illness or physical infirmity they could not understand or explain was considered the presence of some "demon." It was also believed that a demon could be exorcised if one could invoke the name of a still more powerful spirit.

The apostle John has tried to stop someone who seemed to be invoking Jesus' name to cast out a demon. John's concern, at first reading, appears to have some merit—but recall the ongoing battle among the disciples as to who is the greatest among them. Jesus responds, therefore, by condemning the disciples' jealousy and intolerance, warning against an elitist view of discipleship that diminishes or even seeks to eliminate the good done by "outsiders."

Today's gospel includes Jesus' exhortation that it is better to lose one's limb if it leads one to sin. Two notes about these final verses: The "millstone" Jesus speaks of was a large piece of stone that was turned by a pack animal to grind grain. Drowning a criminal by tying him to one of these stones was a method of execution in Rome and Palestine. Gehenna holds a grisly place in Jewish history. The young King Ahaz (2 Chr 38:3) practiced child immolation to the "fire god" at Gehenna. In Jesus' time, Gehenna, a ravine outside Jerusalem, served as the city's refuse site. For Jews of the time, Gehenna was synonymous with our concept of hell.

Focusing the First Reading

Num 11:25-29

Today's first reading recalls a story from the exodus that parallels today's gospel. Moses' young assistant, Joshua, expresses his concern that Eldad and Medad, who were called to be elders but were not formally confirmed as such by Moses, were nonetheless "prophesying" among the Israelites. Moses realizes that God's spirit cannot be constricted by human limitations or expectations; he does not seek to control that spirit nor is he protective of his own prophetic gift. Rather than stop the two "unauthorized" prophets, Moses offers thanks to God for the gift he has bestowed on Israel through the two and the hope that all God's people might become "prophets" of justice and mercy.

Focusing the Responsorial Psalm

Ps 19:8, 10, 12-13, 14 (9a)

Today's responsorial psalm is the second section of Psalm 19, a poem in praise of the "law" of the covenant. For the psalmist, the law is not a restriction but the source of wisdom. In the keeping of the law, the faithful realize the goodness of God's creation and the enduring love of God for his people.

Focusing the Second Reading

Jas 5:1-6

Today's second reading, the final in this series of readings from the letter of James, is a harsh indictment of the self-absorbed rich who have defrauded workers of their just wage, who have lived lives of luxury at the expense of the poor, and who have subjected the innocent to trial for their own gains. The writer of James echoes many prophets of old in warning that wealth of the rich will one day decay into nothing and that God will exact a heavy price from them for their exploitation of the poor.

PROMPTS FOR HOMILISTS, CATECHISTS, AND RCIA TEAMS

When have you given or received the Gospel "cup of water to drink" in Christ's name?

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How does faith become "elitist"?

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Consider ways in which something that is essentially good can also be used destructively.

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How do "non-teachers" lead others to God?

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When have you experienced the Spirit of God at an unexpected time, from an unexpected source?

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