

26<sup>th</sup> Sunday In Ordinary Time—Year B

Numbers 11.25-29

James 5.1-6

Mark 9.38-43, 45, 47-48

I recall, some years ago, I was watching a news story about a man who was rushed into a hospital emergency ward because his hand had been severed from his arm. Most of the time an event, as tragic as it was, would not make the news, but this story had a twist—the man himself had amputated his own hand. The reason he gave for justifying this act of self-mutilation was his reading of this passage from the Gospel of Mark, which was just proclaimed a moment ago. He took Jesus' instruction to cut one's off hand if it caused you to sin literally, thus creating his own medical emergency. Some cynics and non-believers may understand this story as a cautionary warning to not take scripture seriously, even as an example of the dangers of religious teachings in general. While I admit this news story does not present religion in general or scripture in particular in a good light, I would understand it as an example of the dangers that can arise when one interprets scripture in an exclusively private or personal way.

The Church encourages people to read the bible, for it is one of two streams of divine revelation. That is why our liturgies are saturated with scripture, as expressed in the liturgy of the word.

But we can also draw upon of 2000 years of scriptural interpretation, as found in the writings of the Church Fathers, Saints and mystics, and various Church documents. We can also call on the work of scripture scholars to help give us a proper context to understand scripture passages

Drawing upon all that material, it becomes clear that Jesus, in this Gospel passage, is speaking metaphorically, not literally. He is not advocating self-mutilation but is rather using strong images to make an emphatic point: "Avoid all occasions of sin because sin does terrible things to you and to your immortal soul. Sin is in fact so terrible, that if you had to decide between being sinless and having an amputated limb, or have a whole body with sin, you must choose the former." Jesus is using a metaphorical image to make a strong point.

Jesus also uses metaphors elsewhere: He uses a somewhat surrealistic image when he says, elsewhere in scripture, to “take the log out of your own eye first, so you can better see the sliver in your neighbour’s eye”. The image is somewhat bizarre, but we get the point—you need to first attend to your own personal sins, and deal with them, before you can effectively assist your neighbour in removing their sins and faults, as symbolized by the sliver in their eye.

The important point is to not dismiss these metaphorical images, but to take the effort to expose the authentic teaching that underlie these images.

Understanding this, we can explore the first reading and especially the gospel reading and better appreciate the lesson found in these passages.

Moses was a great leader, but was initially a poor delegator. Jethro, his father-in-law, told him to delegate his authority, or he was going to wear himself out by responding to every complaint and problem that arose among the hundreds of thousands of Israelites he was leading through the wilderness. So, listening to his father-in-law, Moses established varying levels of authority to various people, and gave them delegated authority to solve problems, deal with complaints and offer advice, while reserving only the most serious issues for himself. All of this is found in the 18<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Exodus.

This first reading is drawn from the Book of Numbers, the fourth of the Mosaic books. This passage is preceded by Moses complaining to God that the Israelites were angry with him because of the lack of food in the wilderness. God promised them food, and food arrived in the form of quail, more than enough for everyone.

However, God also told Moses to gather 70 men. God would then pass onto them the prophetic charism, a gift of the Holy Spirit that Moses himself had. By this means these men would assist Moses by also being able to discern the will of God and communicate this divine will to the people. But 2 others, outside this group, were also given this prophetic gift. Moses rightly interprets this as an expression of God’s generosity. While Joshua wants these two men stopped, Moses corrects him, for he sees the hand of God at work in these two men.

One lesson we can draw from the first reading is, let God be God, and, as God, if he wishes to be generous with his spiritual gifts, then so be it. We should never try to tell God what to do. He necessarily must be allowed a free hand, which is

not to be impeded by conditions we wish to impose on God and try to tell him what parameters his spirit is allowed in the Church. That doesn't mean we shouldn't examine manifestations of the spirit of God to determine their authenticity, because the discernment of spirits is also a charism. This passage reminds us to deal with one another with an open-hearted love, respect and acceptance.

Like Moses' correction of Joshua, Jesus in today's Gospel reading had to correct the Apostle John, who refused to accept the exorcisms performed in the name of Jesus by someone outside Jesus' close-knit circle of disciples. Jesus invited John to appreciate the spirit of God working beyond those parameters that the Apostle John's limited understanding had fixed in his own mind.

To say that we should be accepting and respectful of each other is hardly a controversial teaching. I think we all get it and would, on most occasions, have no problem with it. The giving of a cup of water, a metaphor meaning be generous to each other out of respect and love for them, is not a teaching we would have an issue with.

But there's more—the tone of this Gospel then shifts so severely that one could experience metaphorical whiplash from the abruptness of the shift.

Using another metaphor, Jesus reminds his followers not to be the cause of scandal to another, a “stumbling block”, lest the scandal cause them to abandon their discipleship. The millstone tied to one's neck is a powerful image, used to make a strong point; do not by your behavior, actions or words cause another to forsake the faith.

As a parish priest, I find this image in particular very prophetically disturbing, in light of the waves of sexual abuse committed by Catholic Clergy around the world, especially those exposed in recent months. I've discerned a pattern in the scandals revealed recently—these heinous acts were done by clergy who took advantage of those, largely young and vulnerable, as a means to satiate their own selfish and immoral desires. In doing this they abused their authority in very shameful and destructive ways. They became, what St. Augustine called “Bad Shepherds”, those who, instead of caring for the sheep as pastors (a word which means shepherd), took advantage of the sheep for their own selfish desires.

With the latter part of this passage from the Gospel of Mark addressing the horror of sin, and in light of what transpired earlier in the Gospel and first reading, one can discern two teachings that every disciple of Jesus must live by.

1. Have an open heart for others, respond to them with love and respect.
2. Live your own discipleship with discipline and rigour. Avoid sin and the occasions of sin, calling upon every spiritual help and moral support to enable yourself to do this.

That sense of rigour and self-discipline must also be applied in light of the lesson found in the second reading from the Letter of James. While this is the strongest condemnation of the wealthy found in the New Testament, the possession of wealth is not what is at issue here. Jesus himself had among his disciples those with abundant monetary resources, Joseph of Arimathea, for example. What is at issue is the selfish, self-centred attitude among some wealthy people who have aroused James' anger. He is responding to an attitude that shows no care for the needs of others, even to being contemptuous of those needs. They treat their labourers as means to pursue their own selfish ends. St. James, in short is condemning those whose selfish sins are impeding others to live in dignity as a child of God. The wealthy have become stumbling blocks, much like those receiving Jesus' condemnation in the Gospel.

To conclude, we are presented with two qualities that must be necessarily found in every disciple of Jesus Christ. They are two sides of the same coin, to use yet another image.

Respond to one another and to their needs with open-hearted generosity, acceptance and love.

Secondly, model your discipleship on that of Christ the Good Shepherd. Avoid sin, so that your life does not become a scandalous stumbling block to others.