

29 September 2024-- 26th Sunday "B"

[Num 11:25-29; Jas 5:1-6; Mk 9:38...48](#)

Homily

In the Book of Numbers, from which our first reading is taken, the people are very often complaining. Life in the desert is demanding and hard. For months they had had no food other than manna. They were fed up with this manna, which had certainly prevented them from starving to death, but which was beginning to make them nauseous. And Moses, who has been their guide since they left Egypt, has had enough of them. So the People complain about God and Moses complains about the People. God then becomes angry too (Num 11:10) and says to Moses: 'All right! It's too much for you to carry all the people on your own. Gather 70 elders in the tent of meeting and I'll give them some of the Spirit you have received'.

Moses did as God told him. But two of the 70 he had chosen, Eldad and Medad, did not come to the tent of meeting at the appointed time. The strange thing was that they received the Spirit, like the other 68, and began to prophesy. Joshua, Moses' right-hand man, tried to stop them. But Moses, who was not at all petty-minded, told him to let them do it, even adding that he wanted all the people to show the same gift of prophecy. Why be jealous of the Spirit received by others? No one possesses the Spirit. On the contrary, it is the Spirit who can possess us if he wants to.

Something similar happens in the Gospel we have just read. This scene follows on from the one we read last Sunday, in which Jesus said: 'If anyone welcomes one of these little ones, he welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the One who sent me'. Some time later, the disciples were frustrated that someone who was not one of them was casting out demons - in other words, performing healings - in Jesus' name. John, who was the beloved disciple but also, along with his brother James, one of the two 'sons of thunder' who wanted to bring down fire from heaven on those who did not receive Jesus, does exactly what Joshua did. He does even more, because he doesn't ask Jesus to stop them; he simply tells him that he wanted - that he took it upon himself - to stop them. He made himself the defender of Jesus' copyright.

To understand the frustration of the disciples, and of John in particular, we need to remember that some time before, Jesus had sent his disciples on a mission with the power to cast out demons. They had returned proud of their prowess, but one man had later brought his possessed son to Jesus, telling him that the disciples had

been unable to heal him. The success of others is sometimes difficult to accept, especially when we experience failure ourselves! We might also think that this story reflects the tensions present in the first Christian community at the time Mark's Gospel was written.

John's remark is petty: 'someone who does not follow us...'. He does not say 'someone who is not one of your disciples', but 'someone who does not follow us'... So he is defending his own prerogatives just as much as those of Jesus, as do most of those who go on crusade to defend the interests of God or the Church... To this petty remark, Jesus simply replied: 'Do not hinder them... he who is not against us is for us'.

Our Gospel contains a second part, in which Jesus warns against the scandal of the 'little ones', using very powerful images - the hand and foot cut off and the eye gouged out - to emphasise the seriousness of such a scandal. These two parts of the Gospel are really complementary: the section on the 'least of these' clearly shows what it means to 'be for Jesus'. It means having renounced the ambitions of power and honour, having adopted an attitude of service, and also a breadth of heart and mind which means that no one can be excluded from the service carried out in God's name.

In his response to John, Jesus teaches us that the fact that we have been called to be his disciples does not make us the sole repositories of his truth and salvation. We have heard Christ's message and we have believed it. This message must be proclaimed by word and deed - by life. The important thing is that it is proclaimed. Millions of people in parts of the world where Christianity has scarcely penetrated live honestly and sincerely the values for which Jesus lived and died. They are witnesses to Jesus even without knowing it. Others closer to us, without calling themselves Christians, or even perhaps calling themselves atheists because they have rejected false images of God, live the Gospel in their daily lives. It is also about them that Jesus said: 'He who is not against me is with me'.

In our time, when so many voices are calling for a struggle between cultures and religions, let us allow this message from Jesus to open our hearts and minds to this first stage of dialogue, which consists of recognising grace and prophecy in the life of the other, whatever their institutional affiliation.

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