

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

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

John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 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, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched."

REFLECTION 1:

SCANDAL AND TOLERANCE

Who is Jesus Christ? To this question, put to us from the beginning of Mark's Gospel, we are invited to give a personal answer – not only in words but also in our way of living. To recognise who Jesus is, is to follow him, to walk with him and carry his cross. It is being open to losing our life to save it. It is to be the servant of all and to prefer nothing to the love of Christ. It is to announce the Good News to the world from which no one is excluded.

The teachings of Jesus that Mark has gathered together after the second prediction of the passion, deal with the disciples' behaviour in the Christian community. Today's Gospel is made up of two contrasting parts. In the first one Jesus shows great tolerance towards all those who, even though not belonging to the group of his disciples, bring relief to others. We must never monopolise the right to do good nor belittle the good others do, even though they may not belong to the fold. In the second part, Jesus shows cutting severity to those who cause scandal. He warns us to eradicate in ourselves everything that can lead us to sin.

Scandal, the sin of being a cause or an occasion of another's sin, is doubly sinful involving one's own sin and the sin of the person scandalised. Scandal, Jesus outlines, can be caused by words or by giving faulty advice – and it can be caused by one's own evil deeds that may be imitated by others. Those in positions of authority, such as parents whose duty it is to bring up their children in the Christian faith are liable to give scandal if they fail to live Christian lives. They may be held accountable not only for their own misdeeds but also for those of their children. True enough there may be many bad influences outside the home, but the good example of parents can often counteract these.

The second message Jesus has for us in today's Gospel is that we should all realise that eternal life is worth any sacrifice that we may be called on to make. The road we have to travel in life is not an easy one. If we wish to reach heaven, we must be prepared to follow Jesus Christ. We must not allow others to lead us astray but be prepared and determined to conquer and resist our own evil inclinations. Of course the cutting off of one's foot or hand or the plucking out of one's eyes is not to be taken literally. This is a coded way of impressing upon us that the kingdom of God, the future eternal life, is worth any sacrifice, similar to enduring an amputation of an infected human organ, in order to survive and live.

Jesus does not advocate a happy-clappy type of Christianity. The Gospel today is a stern warning not to stand in the way of the faithful. If we lead others astray we become candidates to have a heavy millstone tied around our necks and sent on a quick one-way trip to the bottom of the sea. Ouch!

REFLECTION 2: THE STATUS TRAP

O Henry is well known for the surprise endings to his stories. One story concerns an emotionally starved child. She is always asking her father if she could sit on his lap. The father always puts her off saying, 'Go outside and play'. The inevitable happens. The girl grows up, accepting affection from anyone who offers it; she becomes a prostitute. When she dies Peter says to Jesus, 'We've got a bad lassie here'. Then comes the surprising ending. Jesus says to Peter, 'When she comes welcome her into heaven, but when her father comes, hold him responsible for her life'. How vigilant are we to do anything that may cause anyone, especially a child, to lose faith in Jesus? The fact is that children especially set their watches by our adult clocks. Jesus says today in our Gospel (Mark 9: 42) that if anyone should cause one of these little ones to lose faith in him, it would be better for that person to be thrown into the sea.

Today's Gospel follows directly on last Sunday's. In response to the disciples' self-importance, Jesus, after placing the little child in their midst, explains that real greatness comes from service, from living in solidarity with the lowly one in service. We see that the Apostle John's statement to Jesus seems very much like an attempt to change the subject. John says 'Listen; instead of talking about serving the little people, there's a real problem here that needs fixing. Look out! Someone else is out there doing what we do! We tried to stop him but were not successful. Now the ball is in your court!' it's easy to imagine Jesus looking at the disciples as if they were total strangers. They hadn't a clue about who he was, what he was all about and how he was living in response to his Father's will.

They were caught up in the status game, they had made discipleship an exclusive club in which only the bona fide members had a right to promote the kingdom of God. As the group tried to guard their privilege they didn't realise that they were actually betraying Jesus and his life's cause. So, to move his disciples beyond the status trap, Jesus returns to the theme of 'littleness'. 'So, you are worried about someone else casting out demons? Ok then, listen to me, anyone who donates a cup of water on behalf of God's kingdom deserves a reward'. Then he goes on to talk about the horror of scandal and declares shockingly to our ears, that self-mutilation is preferable to scandal.

Jesus doesn't want to put down his disciples; he merely wants to assure them and us that such a distorted approach to living the Christian life should not survive. Mark saw the same tendency in his community 40 years after Jesus' death. The temptation to pursue prestige over the message of the Gospel will never leave the church; the pursuit of medals of honour – toys, and the top places at table is still with us. The fact is that baptism does not drown the ego; it only brings us into the midst of a community that can tame us by calling us to service.