**26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)**

**26th September 2021**

**First Reading Numbers 11;25-29**

Moses had appointed seventy elders to help him in governing the people in the wilderness. The Hebrew word for elder means ‘an old man’ or ‘bearded’ and they were the decision makers in their tribes.

In this story they were given a share in some of the 'spirit" of Moses to assist them. In the thinking of the writer this is a share in his authority. The seventy are empowered to act in the name of Moses, and therefore God also. This resulted in a temporary manifestation of charismatic prophecy among the seventy elders.

(The Hebrew for ‘but not again’ suggests that it was a ‘one-off’ gift, but could also be translated ‘and could not stop’ which implies continuity)

After it ceased, two men, Eldad and Medad, received a similar gift of the spirit and likewise engaged in charismatic prophecy. It appears that Eldad and Medad were not members of the group of seventy elders, that is, not in the legitimate succession and had not been with the others during the occasion.

An overzealous Joshua urged Moses to stop them from exercising an unauthorized ministry but Moses refused—the Spirit is a free agent and cannot be limited to regularly appointed officers. Its freedom to blow where it wills is a pointer to the day when the whole people of God will prophesy—an aspiration that is anticipated at Pentecost.

This leads Moses to express what is the point of the story, that God does not restrict his grace to a privileged few. He is greater than the limits of our thinking. In our world we could say that evidence of his work is greater than the Sacraments which celebrate it. Would that as many as possible were engaged in that service! And Moses fervently wishes: 'Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!'

**Second Reading The Letter of James 5:1-6**

There is nothing wrong in being wealthy per se. But wealth causes problems that the poor do not have. (Mark 10;23-27) One risk is to allow wealth to supplant more important issues. Another is that wealth gives access to power which may be abused.

Indeed since prehistory and among all the peoples of the earth wealth and power have been associated with cruelty and injustice. Such was the theme of the preaching of Amos (6;1-7) in 850 B.C.

Like Amos, this New Testament passage shows concern for social justice but in the Roman Empire and provides an example of the reasons Christians were considered radicals. Amos and James are both warnings to the rich against exploiting their employees. In chapters four and five of his ‘letter’ James turns to two groups of rich persons: merchants and big landowners.

James accuses them of luxurious living and oppressing the poor. He is clearly influenced by a saying of Jesus: 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven' (Matthew 6:19-20).

As you will have seen from the notes for 29thAugust we are unsure of the identity of the author, James. (In the dictionary there are five James mentioned in the New Testament and it is not surprising if some copyists confused them)

It may be that James’ ‘letter’ is in fact a few homilies from an old synagogue library used in a new congregation and so bound up with some Christian manuscripts. This would explain the tactlessness of his remarks. For Christian congregations were largely lower class from slaves to shopkeepers with few wealthy members. Such remarks as those in to-day’s reading would be highly insulting to such people.

**Gospel Mark 9;38-43, 45, 47-48**

The obvious connection between the first reading and the Gospel is the principle that the work of the Spirit is not limited to the official channels. Even though we consider the Catholic Church to be the recognisable continuum of that of the 1st century, it does not have a monopoly of grace. Christian discipleship. even sainthood, may be found outside. This has been recognised from the beginning. As Augustine wisely remarked: "How many sheep there are without, how many wolves there are within!" We recognise that the Spirit moves others to heights of holiness and we rejoice accordingly. In this incident the exorcist was not ‘one of us’ but ‘on our side’ and to his credit.

One does not have to choose between a "visible" and an "invisible Church" Both concepts have positive elements. Yet there may be members of the Church who are not visible to those of us who are clearly members, but whose membership is acknowledged by God alone. If anyone is saved, he must in some sense be a member of the Church but in what sense, we cannot always say.

As a correlative of a belief in demons, the practice of exorcism was widespread in the Hellenistic period among both Jews and Gentiles. The apostolic Church found itself faced with the problem of its attitude to non-Christian exorcists who invoked the name of Jesus (see Acts 19:13-16). Mark 9:38-43 gives one answer.

The fact of casting out demons 'in the name of Jesus' shows that the exorcist recognized the power of Jesus; he is not against Jesus or his disciples even if he is not known to them. The saying of Jesus (v. 39) offers his disciples a directive: they are not to forbid one who acts so**.** Matthew (5:29-30) and Luke (17:1-2) use the same incident in different ways but Mark follows it with two lessons.

One is that any outsider who befriends a Christian will be rewarded or conversely if they cause him to sin will be severely punished. This naturally follows the good work of the exorcist.

But Mark’s second lesson is most peculiar. (In the Missal it starts at the second sentence of the third paragraph) I cannot arrive at it from the position of the exorcist and think that it must have had a different cause which we have now lost. We must also hesitate as to what Jesus actually said and meant.

If we take it at face value, it is a dramatic metaphor, taken to an extreme position and tripled for emphasis. In imagination, the Lord urges people to make the costliest sacrifices in order to avoid sin and enter into life.

'Hell,' in this passage translates the Hebrew 'Gehenna' Gehenna was a dry wadi on the west and south sides of the walled city of Jerusalem, where infants had been sacrificed to pagan gods since before the settlement under Joshua. (Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5-6).

In the time of Jesus, it was an open dump for offal and refuse. There was a permanent smouldering fire and wild scavenging creatures. It was not especially a place of punishment but of rejection and has entered our medieval wall paintings as the destination of the damned. All of this has to be read in the context of exuberant Semitic imagery.

Hell, Hades, Sheol, Purgatory, Paradise are all different words for the ‘place of the dead’ with no agreed distinctions. Only shallow literalism could have led to the later notion of hell as a place of fiery torment. And the notion of a God who condemns sinners to that hell has to be acknowledged for what it objectively is: blasphemy.

**Footnote of no great importance**

The reference at the head of the Gospel reading in the Sunday Missal appears to omit verses 44 and 46, and if you go to a modern translation to see what they say, you will not find them. The omission of these verses is due to the fact that they are mere repetitions of verse 48 and do not appear in the earliest and best manuscripts.

The text at the time the verse numbers were inserted (Chapters in the NT first appear in 1227 and verses in 1555 A.D.) was translated from poor quality 10th century manuscripts. We are guessing as to the reason why they were repeated but it may be that the scribe who was copying a manuscript finished his shift. When another came to continue the work, he accidentally started in the wrong place.

It is due to such simple reasons that we have the few inconsistencies that we do have. This example is clearly unimportant, but there is no discrepancy in the New Testament more important than this one. The integrity of the New Testament is by far the most reliable of all historical documents of all time.

You will find verses 44 and 46 in older translations such as the Authorised/King James Bible of 1611. This is why, for reading the Scriptures, you are advised to use the latest translation available. It is more accurate to the original.