



*Twenty sixth Sunday Ordinary Time 2006*

*Numbers 11:25-29 James 5:1-6 Mark 9:38-48*

One of the topics of the Gospel today is the difficult subject of scandal. It is rather interesting that this is coupled with a story about an exorcist who is not a disciple. The reading from the book of Numbers also picks up the theme of who is “in” and who is “out” in terms of the religious community.

The language of Mark is very strong in its condemnation of scandal particularly with regard to those Jesus calls the little ones. The reference is to those whose faith is as yet unformed. It’s interesting that the word scandal originally meant the harm done to a person’s belief by a religious person. Theology is faith seeking understanding and so we can speak of the process of growing in faith but those who have positions of authority need to be sensitive to the stage of formation of the hearer.

We all need to be challenged but that is not easy without a relationship between proclaimer and hearer. There is always a difficulty when leaders adopt a mode of language or attitudes which do not respect the journeys’ of peoples.

One of the most comforting aspects of the Gospel stories is how often Jesus reminded those who criticized him of the plurality of view that existed in their own scriptures. It is true that in troubled times people often seek the comfort of rigid views and comfortable certainties, but this is not the way of growth and can at best provide a temporary breathing space.

The story from Numbers is about sharing ministry. Moses complains to God about the amount of work required by leadership. Under God’s direction, Moses calls seventy seniors to receive the spirit of leadership. The language is very concrete. God will take some of the spirit given to Moses and share it out among the elders.

This emphasizes that it is the same spirit that is shared. Then, as now, there is always someone who is late for the ceremonies. Eldad and Medad, who were on the list, were absent from the tent for the sharing of leadership. However, they recognised that the ceremony was the outward sign of God’s action so they set about using their new gifts. Naturally there were those who objected.

Moses with a flash of insight recognised that the gifts of God cannot be circumscribed by people and replied to the complainers that it would be wonderful if everybody shared in the spirit of prophecy.

The story from Mark extends this understanding of the graciousness of God in the distribution of spiritual gifts. John reports that a man in the area is

expelling demons in the name of Jesus. He also reports that a few of them had a go at stopping the fellow. John complains to Jesus on the grounds that the man isn't part of the circle of disciples.

Jesus tells the disciples that they were wrong to try and prevent the person from acting in Jesus' name. If the person believes that God can act through him then he must have the spirit of Jesus even if he is not part of the company. The tolerance of Jesus' reply is interesting from the point of view of subsequent history.

How we might ask, if Jesus presented such an attitude, did his followers in later ages become so bigoted against outsiders? One human problem is the need to feel part of an organization. If those who have dedicated their lives to the Gospel, are on a par with the person who occasionally does a good deed, then those who equate discipleship with rewards for effort are going to feel let down.

We are called to rejoice in the achievements of those who live godly lives even when their approach may be different from ours. Whoever we are, let us celebrate the goodness that abounds in people and let people be free to express this goodness in a variety of ways.

Patricia Stevenson rsj