

Commentary on the Gospel: Concern for Everyone's Sanctity

Gospel for the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B), and commentary.

Gospel (*Mk 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 mighty work in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for

us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’”

Commentary

Today's Gospel reminds us of various teachings of Jesus on what Christian life involves. Mark's description is restrained, but the forceful words readily reach the depth of our soul. The first idea could be expressed in this way: God gives his gifts as he sees fit, and it should always be a source of joy for us to see how other people welcome them generously and use them in the service of the Gospel. The great variety of riches in the Church comes to mind here, and also the possibility that our heart—which struggles every day to rise above itself and become a bit bigger—looks with distrust and even with a certain distain on some of those who work alongside us in the Lord's vineyard. Jesus' words are clear: "no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us." Certainly,

only God can search the depths of the heart and discern a person's real intentions. We, on our part, need to be guided by external signs; for example: "by their fruits you will know them." Although is not entirely the case, since we cannot see the hidden fruits until they come to light, if we have the wisdom to see them.

Jesus encourages us to realize that he works in a hidden way, in and through hearts, and that his action is unique to each person. We can never know to what extent other people's deeds are a docile, if perhaps hesitant, response to an interior inspiration from the Holy Spirit. What these responses of love produce in the soul and in the world transcends our knowledge. Often we cannot perceive it, but God can. That is why we are reminded that every act of true love has an eternal value, and that if it truly stems from love it always has a "reward" attached to it,

since it brings “new love” into the world. Thus Jesus’ words are an invitation to value the rich action of the Holy Spirit in souls and to strengthen the bonds of communion with all men and women, especially the baptized, praying for one another and learning from each one’s specific way of seeking souls and leading them to Christ.

The words about giving scandal are another facet of what Jesus has just said. We desire the holiness of others with our whole heart, and therefore we do everything we can to prevent our example from disconcerting them or distancing them from God. It is an invitation to be one another’s guardians, to watch over each other on our daily journey. We are not isolated islands, indifferent to what our words and actions may produce in others. Certainly, we cannot ask everyone for their advice before taking a step. But the Holy Spirit has

been poured into our hearts, enabling us to think and act through participation in divine wisdom. We don't do something simply because it seems good to us personally, without a concern for others. But this doesn't mean that we let ourselves be carried away by what others will think, hiding our Christian condition. It is something quite different.

To be concerned about giving scandal is to be aware that our deeds never affect only ourselves. We know we have weaknesses, but we diligently strive to overcome them, and try to prevent what others may see in us from harming them, both those who are "strong" and those who are "weak." Moreover, Jesus reminds us that there are some people who are especially weak and vulnerable. Among them are children, who find it so helpful to have good role models and who can be hurt so much by not having them

or having bad ones. We could also consider here those who are taking their first steps in the faith, those who rely on us, etc.

We can learn a lot from so many who have preceded us: from their effort to know their own frailties as well as possible, from their eagerness to reach the roots of their actions in order to remedy what is unhealthy, from the help they sought or accepted. For this path cannot be traveled alone: how much we need good spiritual accompaniment! How much good it does us to desire, as strongly as possible, that those around us advance with joy and hope on the path to holiness! That much, in part, God has placed in our hands.

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