

26th Sunday of Year B: No common theme to this week's readings.
First Reading: Numbers 11:25-29: Moses accepts 2 unofficial prophets;
Second Reading: James 5:1-6: Labourers defrauded of their wages;
Gospel: Mark 9:38-48; 1 unofficial exorcist; scandals; occasions of sin.

At the risk of being 'struck off' the list of approved preachers in the RC Church, I admit that I find it hard to see what the Vatican liturgists were aiming at, when they put this weekend's readings together. The first reading & the start of the gospel share a common theme – the idea of unauthorized people doing good things. The only link I can see between that and the rest of the material is that 'actions speak louder than words' (in both bad and good senses).

That simple concept is the point of the first reading, from the Book of Numbers. This rarely-used book tells the story of the Hebrews in the desert after the events at Mount Sinai; and, as the title suggests, it contains many facts & figures about the Israelites' travels and religious experiences. In this excerpt, God had given 70 of the elders the gift of the Holy Spirit to help them prophesy. Two had not been present at the giving, but had begun to prophesy all the same. In the event, someone told Moses about them; far from wanting to stop them, he was happy that they were able to perform this work. The results mattered. In a similar vein, this Sunday's gospel tells of a man - not a disciple of Jesus - casting out devils in his name. The young apostle John was annoyed, but Jesus, like Moses 1300 years earlier, simply said that the man was right, and should not be stopped: "*Anyone not against us is for us.*" Again, the results mattered.

I should like to develop this idea (God using "unauthorized" people for his purposes) with reference to a controversial area: people outside our Church having skills & knowledge that assist us, also offering spiritual help. I say this is 'controversial' because some argue that recognizing people outside our RC community suggests that the Church itself no longer matters – that one religion and group is as good as the next. This is not implied at all: the 2nd Vatican Council, in its dogmatic statement "The Church", says bluntly that Jesus wanted people to be saved through the Church; that she has the fullness of the means of Christian Salvation; so those who deliberately leave her are doing wrong. But that said, the same statement teaches seriously that those on the outside are also used by God. Other Christian Churches often have many of the same things as us: the Bible; belief in Jesus' divinity; a structure based on deacons, priests & bishops; some of the sacraments we use; and so on. The Council taught that those things are also the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and that God uses them to work among us for people's spiritual welfare. Anyone who has shared scripture or

theology discussion-groups with other Christians will testify that they often have insights that we do not, and that their ideas really help us spiritually. That is what the Vatican II bishops intended.

There is another, less happy theme shared by the 2nd reading & gospel: the damage done by public bad behaviour – especially when the culprits are known to be Christians. St James writes about those rich people who defraud their labourers of fair wages: *“Listen to the wages you held back, calling out: the cries have reached the ears of the Lord of Hosts.”* (In the old catechism we learned at school, this was one of those sins “crying out to heaven for vengeance”.) I suggest that St James was not thinking of some of our industrial disputes, but places where workers have no rights, and often face starvation.

In the gospel, Jesus is equally blunt. When he talks of anyone *“who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have faith”*, he means those who corrupt the innocent – especially the young. The person doing this *“would be better thrown into the sea, with a great millstone round his neck”*. This is not the cuddly Jesus of the parable of the Good Shepherd, but God’s prophet who warns that when we do evil actions, they often affect others badly, as well as having serious results for us. Many in the Church now prefer to ignore this harder aspect of Jesus’ teaching, but it is there in the gospels for all to read, and we cannot pretend it is not. For mature Christians, the idea that our moral decisions have consequences does not come as a shock; it should help us form a conscience that is sensitive to God’s law & others’ needs, as well as the effects on our long-term salvation. Those abusing the powerless should take heed.

But how far do we take Jesus’ words literally? Clearly, this gospel has bits of deliberate exaggeration (hyperbole) designed to make the point strongly. I am sure that Jesus did not want to drown anyone in the sea with a huge stone round the neck. Neither did he want us to cut off our hand or foot, or pluck out our eye, lest we use these things to commit sin. (At least, I hope not!) I suspect that what he intended was that we avoid what used to be called ‘occasions of sin’, meaning those situations that we know (often from sad experience) lead us down the road into what is evil.

As I said at the start, what links this set of readings is the idea of actions speaking louder than words. At times, this can be uncomfortable, but it is always realistic. *Fr Jim Dunne.*