

## GOSPEL

MARK 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

John said to Jesus, ‘Master, we saw a man who is not one of us casting out devils in your name; and because he was not one of us we tried to stop him.’ But Jesus said, ‘You must not stop him: no one who works a miracle in my name is likely to speak evil of me. Anyone who is not against us is for us.’

‘If anyone gives you a cup of water to drink just because you belong to Christ, then I tell you solemnly, he will most certainly not lose his reward.’

‘But anyone who is an obstacle to bring down one of these little ones who have faith, would be better thrown into the sea with a great millstone round his neck. And if your hand should cause you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter into life crippled, than to have two hands and go to hell, into the fire that cannot be put out. And if your foot should cause you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter into life lame, than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye should cause you to sin, tear it out; it is better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell where their worm does not die nor their fire go out.’

## A REFLECTION BY POPE FRANCIS

This Sunday’s Gospel presents us with one of those characteristics that are very instructive about Jesus’ life with his disciples. They had seen a man — who did not belong to the group of Jesus’ followers — casting out demons in Jesus’ name, and thus they wanted to forbid him to do so. With the zealous enthusiasm typical of young people, John refers the matter to the Teacher, seeking his support. However, quite to the contrary, Jesus replies: “Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is for us”.

John and the other disciples display a ‘closed’ attitude when faced with a circumstance that does not fit with their programme, in this case the action, albeit good, of a person ‘outside’ the circle of followers. Jesus on the other hand, appears very free, fully open to

the freedom of the Spirit of God, whose actions are not limited by any confines nor boundaries. Jesus wants to educate his disciples — and us today — on this inner freedom.

It is good for us to reflect on this episode and to perform a small examination of conscience. The disciples’ attitude is very human, very common, and we can observe this in Christian communities throughout history, probably in ourselves as well. In good faith, indeed with zeal, one would like to protect the authenticity of a certain experience, safeguarding the founder or leader from false impersonators. But at the same time, there is a sort of fear of ‘competition’ — and this is bad: the fear of competition —, that someone may steal new followers, and we are thus unable to appreciate the good that others do: it is not good because he is ‘not one of us’, they say. It is a form of self-referentiality. Actually, there is the root of proselytism here. And the Church — Pope Benedict used to say — does not grow through proselytism; it grows by attraction, that is, it grows by bearing witness to others with the strength of the Holy Spirit.

God’s great freedom in giving himself to us represents a challenge and an exhortation to modify our behaviours and our relationships. It is the invitation which Jesus addresses to us today. He calls us not to think according to the categories of ‘friend/enemy’, ‘us/them’, ‘those who are in/those who are out’, ‘mine/yours’, but rather to go beyond, to open our heart in order to be able to recognize God’s presence and action, even in unusual and unpredictable environments that are not part of our circle. It is a matter of being more attentive to the authenticity of the good, the beautiful and the true that is done, rather than to the name and the origin of the one who does it. And — as the remaining part of the Gospel suggests to us today — instead of judging others, we must examine ourselves and ‘sever’, without compromise, all that can scandalize those persons who are weakest in faith.

May the Virgin Mary, an example of docile openness to God’s surprises, help us to recognize the signs of the Lord’s presence in our midst, so that we

may find him everywhere he manifests himself, even in the most unthinkable and unusual situations. May she teach us to love our community without jealousy or closure, always open to the vast horizon of the action of the Holy Spirit.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- We see in this passage that it is very possible for us to create obstacles to others receiving the gift of faith. What do I need to bring under the transformation of the Holy Spirit, so as to be a more authentic, joyful witness to the Gospel and my relationship with Jesus?
- How do we as members of the Church need to be careful not to be self referential by being jealous, or critical of those we see as outsiders, but whom Jesus would regard as disciples?
- Jesus obviously takes sin very seriously and points to the radical way we need to eradicate it in our lives, and preached a Gospel of repentance. What do you understand are the things we should do to enable be transformed into a new creation, continually?

## PRAYER

*Spend some time in prayer with one another*

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. “Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray”)
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others’ prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the ‘Glory Be’ or similar prayer.