

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

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The Gospel of today’s Liturgy recounts a brief dialogue between Jesus and the Apostle John, who speaks on behalf of the entire group of disciples. They saw a man who was casting out demons in the name of the Lord, but they stopped him because he was not part of their group. At this point, Jesus invited them not to hinder those who do good, because they contribute to the fulfilment of God’s plan (cf. Mk 9:38-41). Then he admonished them: instead of dividing people into good and bad, we are all called to be vigilant over our own hearts, lest we succumb to evil and bring scandal to others (cf. vv. 42-45, 47-48).

In short, Jesus’ words reveal a temptation, and offer an exhortation. The temptation is to be “closed off”. The disciples would like to hinder a good deed simply because it is performed by someone who does not belong to their group. They think they have the

“exclusive right over Jesus”, and that they are the only ones authorised to work for the Kingdom of God. But this way, they end up feeling that they are privileged and consider others as outsiders, to the extent of becoming hostile towards them. Brothers and sisters, every closure tends in fact to keep us at a distance from those who do not think like we do, and this — we know — is the root of many great evils in history: of absolutism that has often generated dictatorships and of great violence towards those who are different.

But we need to be vigilant about closure in the Church too. Because the devil, who is the divider — this is what the word “devil” means, the one who divides — always insinuates suspicions to divide and exclude people. He tempts by using cunning, and it can happen as with those disciples, who ended up excluding even someone who had cast out the devil himself! Sometimes we too, instead of being humble and open communities, can give the impression of being the “top of the class” and keep others at a distance; instead of trying to walk with everyone, we can show off our “believer’s license”: “I am a believer”, “I am Catholic”, “I belong to this association, to that one”, and the others, poor things, do not. This is a sin. Showing off one’s “believer’s license” to judge and exclude. Let us ask for the grace to overcome the temptation to judge and to categorise, and may God preserve us from the “nest” mentality, that of jealously guarding ourselves in the small group of those who consider themselves good: the priest with his loyal followers, the pastoral workers closed off among themselves so that no one can infiltrate, the movements and associations in their own particular charism, and so on. Closed. All this runs the risk of turning Christian communities into places of separation and not of communion. The Holy Spirit does not want closure; He wants openness, welcoming communities where there is a place for everyone.

And then in the Gospel there is Jesus’ exhortation: instead of judging everything and everyone, let us be attentive to ourselves! Indeed, the risk is to be inflexible towards others and indulgent towards ourselves. And Jesus urges us not to make a deal with evil, with striking images: “If something in you causes you to sin, cut it

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off!” (cf. vv. 43-48). If something harms you, cut it off! He does not say, “If something is a reason for scandal, stop, think about it, improve a bit...”. No: “Cut it off! Immediately! Jesus is radical in this, demanding, but for our own good, like a good doctor. Every cut, every pruning, is so we can grow better and bear fruit in love.

Let us then ask ourselves: what is in me that is contrary to the Gospel? What, in concrete terms, does Jesus want me to cut out of my life?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What stood out to you from the Gospel or Reflection/ Homily?



Head: Why might we be prone to thinking in terms of insiders and outsiders, those that belong and those that don't?



Heart: Have you ever felt like you were an outsider in your parish community? Has this changed and how did the change come about?



Hands: As Pope Francis requested, let us then ask ourselves: what is in me that is contrary to the Gospel? What does Jesus want me to cut out of my life? Share to whatever extent you feel comfortable.

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 (for example, “Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray”)
3. Offer 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 praying the ‘Glory Be’.