

Homily for the 26th Sunday, Sept. 27, 2009

Intro: The Bishops wanted us to speak about the first half of today's gospel, as is evidenced by the first reading. But the second half of the gospel, about cutting off our hand, of plucking out our eye, is more likely to capture our attention. In at least two homilies I have pointed out that this is a graphic Semitic figure of speech called hyperbole, or exaggeration, so I won't repeat myself here. I want to talk about what the liturgy asks us to see.

In the Book of Numbers the people are complaining about the tasteless manna that God had given them, and so Moses complains to God that he cannot carry the weight of this cantankerous people. And God tells Moses to assemble 70 true elders and authorities of the people and he will confer on them some of Moses' own spirit, so that they can help him with leadership and administration. When the 70 are assembled at the tent the Lord does give them some of Moses' spirit and they begin to prophesy. Two of the men who had been on the list did not come to the tent to receive the spirit. But they too received the spirit and prophesied. When Joshua, one of the 70 elders, heard this, he asked Moses to stop them, since they had not been ordained. Moses replied, "Are you jealous for the sake of my authority? I wish that all the people of the Lord were prophets." So Moses recognizes God's work, and wants all the people to have the spirit of God in prophecy. This, then, is the background for

Mark: Right after Jesus has instructed his disciples that the leaders of the Christian community should be least of all, John complains that someone who is not part of their inner group is exorcising demons in Jesus' name. The disciples tried to prevent him, because he had not been ordained by Jesus and sent out to cast out demons (Mark 6:6-13). Like Moses, Jesus does not want him stopped: "No one who performs a mighty deed in my name can speak evil of me; for anyone who is not against us is with us. (This is a very interesting reply, for Jesus elsewhere had said, "Anyone who is not with us is against us [Matt 12:30/Luke 11:23].") In short, Jesus says that this exorcist is part of them: he exorcises in Jesus' name, through the power of Jesus.

So the meaning of both passages is that the Spirit of God is not limited to the actual selection, or ordaining of people for ministry. Just as in Acts 10 the Spirit of God descended on the pagan Cornelius' household even before they were baptized, the Spirit blows where it wants to blow (John 3:8), and is not limited by

human rituals or intentions. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “By your fruits you shall know them.”

The Meaning for us:

When I was a boy the Church had pretty well understood itself for four centuries as the Reign of God on earth. The Kingdom of God was the Roman Catholic Church. Of course the Church thought that other people of good will, following their consciences could be saved, but it had no explanation of how they could be saved outside of the Kingdom of God.

The Second Vatican Council took a decisive step forward in solving this problem, in a manner closer to the two readings in today’s liturgy (*Lumen Gentium*, § 15; *The Decree on Ecumenism*). First of all, Jesus came to establish the Kingdom of God on Earth, and this is a reality bigger than just the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church is the most faithful embodiment of God’s reign on earth. But there are other Christian communities who possess the written Word of God, baptism and the life of grace, with faith, hope, and charity. Sometimes these communities preach the word of Jesus with power which casts out the devil from our world, and issues in marvelous works of charity, which are signs of genuine faith. They do not participate in the fullness of what Christ intended for his Church---the fullness of seven sacraments, and the structure of a hierarchy under the Pope as successor of St. Peter. Many do not have, or rightly understand, some of the dogmas necessary for the fullness of the Reign of God on earth. But if they do great things in the name of Jesus, like today’s gospel, we acknowledge them as acting through the power of Christ, and we accept them as our separated Christian brothers.

The Church at Vatican II also acknowledged that the power of God was often at work in non-Christian religions, principally in Judaism, less so in Islam, and less so in other world religions which do not acknowledge the uniqueness of one creator and redeeming God. “From their fruits you shall judge them.” We recognize signs of sainthood in Mahatma Gandhi and the Dalai Lama. When they build up the unity of humanity through works of justice, universal love, and peace, we acknowledge that the Spirit of God is at work in them. When they engage in acts of torture, terrorist bombing, and fomenting hatred of others, we judge them as bereft of that Spirit, just as we judge ourselves by those same standards that Christ gave us.

Yet when all is said and done, John in today’s gospel does reflect a basic reality. Jesus did call Twelve, he did establish a church on St. Peter to foster the works

of justice and peace that come from authentic faith. He did ask them to preach a distinct view of God and his messiah other than what the Romans and even the Jews were expecting. This Roman Catholic Church is the emerging full solution to the problem of evil in our world, but it is still moving forward as a pilgrim church, learning as it goes. It will look different in the 22nd century than what it looks like today, just as it looks different today from what it looked in the nineteenth century. It will be what God wants it to become if it learns from the good that the Spirit of Jesus is doing in others. That is what the Council meant when it asked the church to “search the signs of the times.”

This wonderfully open church is the great gift of God which we have to proclaim to others, for there will be no justice and peace without it. We all need to keep attending to its unique message so that we can proclaim it to others who do not have that Holy Spirit in its fullness. It is not just our good news; it is, in the universal saving will of God (1 Tim 2:4) good news for everyone. Share it!