

Growing up attending Church as a young boy I used to call this Sunday *Poke you in the eye Sunday*, on account of the graphic language of the Gospel. As I grew up and studied the scriptures I got to see there is much more going on beyond its literal sense! In our Gospel passage Jesus continues to address his disciples' mistaken pursuits of worldly greatness while at the same time offering a challenging instruction on the necessity of sacrifice and the purpose of faith. These instructions have a great deal to offer us as well.

The disciples bring to Jesus what they believe to be a problem: Other people, who were not among the group of followers, were healing in the name of Jesus. Jesus explains to them that this situation is a blessing and not a problem. The problem was not in the healing but in the disciple's possessiveness and defensiveness of their perceived place. The disciples were exemplifying the unhealthy thirst for power and control that would stifle and thwart the good works of others, if those works encroached on their patch. Their objection raises the question as to why they themselves were not trying to heal the possessed man in the first place. Perhaps they were envious that someone else was doing what they should have been doing.

It is interesting, too, that the disciples objected to the actions of the healer because "he did not follow us". They seem to demonstrate little concern for the one who needed healing while they were overly concerned and possessive about their own status as leaders. Their objection makes us wonder what their ultimate priority was—that people follow Jesus or that people follow them. These attitudes can be destructive in the life of the Church today as much as they were destructive in the lives of the disciples nearly two thousand years ago. Sometimes people involved in parish life can be very possessive about their authority and field of responsibility which might lead them to be resentful and antagonistic towards others who are involved with those efforts.

As members of Christ's body, it is important to realise that such feelings reveal a need for conversion and a deep repentance so that we can promote the work of the Holy Spirit wherever, whenever, and through whomever God wants. Such an attitude will lead us to care for those in need rather than seek a mistaken greatness based on the ability to control rather than the willingness to cooperate.

Jesus then gives the Church an important governing principle in its relationship with the larger world: Those who are not against us are for us. The Holy Spirit can work in mysterious ways to share the grace of Christ with all human beings. God is not limited by our expectations or understandings when it comes to his mercy and love. All people are invited to know, love, and serve the Lord. It does not mean that all people will respond to this call or that all paths are equal. Rather, it acknowledges that God's grace can work in mysterious ways, even in the hearts of those who do not know Christ, so that they respond to the voice of their conscience (Holy Spirit) and do what is good.

When Christians encounter goodness, charity, and other values of the Gospel in non-Christian environments, they should interpret these positive values as a cooperation with the Gospel. This is an important principle for the Christian understanding of salvation. This teaching does not in any way diminish the importance of seeking to introduce all persons to Jesus who is the only source of the grace and life which inspires their good actions. Rather, it acknowledges how those who do not know Christ can benefit from a real cooperation with the Holy Spirit and merit from their good

efforts. Ultimately, cooperation itself can become an effective means of evangelisation in such circumstances.

The next area of greatness Jesus emphasises is the faithful sacrifice needed to care for the little ones in our midst. To be a faithful person means both preventing the scandal that causes others to lose faith and being willing to make the necessary amendments of life to avoid occasions of sin. To demonstrate this point Jesus uses the dramatic example of removing a hand, foot, and eye. There can be various levels on which this teaching can be interpreted. The image of a body can either refer to an individual person and the need to amend their personal causes of weakness, but the image can also refer to the corporate body of the Church and the need to remove or discipline members who are causing scandal and serious sin in the community (the image of a body was used as a communal and political metaphor in ancient times). This teaching on the necessity of sacrifice was commonly known in the time of Jesus.

However you wish to apply the images, it should be remembered that Jesus is speaking metaphorically and not about physical mutilation. The ancient audience would have known that our Lord was speaking in metaphors. Nonetheless, the Lord is addressing the need for real and ready sacrifice on the part of disciples when it comes to avoiding those things that lead us astray and into sin. Disciples who want to be great must be people who can humbly acknowledge their need to amend their lives so as to avoid those temptations, which play on their natural weaknesses. Greatness, then, is not in doing what we want, but in living as God wants. Such a life inspires others' faith and strengthens the little ones, while a life of self-will and sin scandalises little ones.

The last thing Jesus addresses in our Gospel is the fundamental purpose of faith when he contrasts eternal life with *Gehenna* (an image for Hell). It is this stark alternative that motivates us to embrace sacrifice, especially the painful sacrifices necessary to avoid situations of sin on a personal, communal, and institutional level. It is also this contrast that motivates us to seek above all the mission of the Gospel rather than our own personal kingdoms. Finally, it is this contrast that ultimately reminds us why we follow Jesus and carry the cross of faithful discipleship. The purpose of the Christian life is to enter the Kingdom of God. If we settle for anything less than that goal for any reason, we have wasted the gift of faith and distorted the meaning of discipleship. There can be lots of reasons why people pursue religious experiences, membership in faith communities, and works of mercy, but if any of those reasons are anything less than eternal life with God, we have pursued a mistaken goal and lost the focus that is necessary to embrace difficult moments of sacrifice. Faith is not a sentimental ornament in life; faith must be the primary driving principle that effectively leads us to God.

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