

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME — B

READING I Nm 11:25-29

READING II Jas 5:1-6

GOSPEL Mk 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

In Nm 11:14-17 (an Elohist tradition), Moses complains that by himself he is unable to care for the people. In response to this complaint, God promises to have seventy elders of Israel receive the prophetic spirit which Moses possesses (see Ex 18:13-26; 24:1-2, 9-11).

Although difficult to control, the story deals with later problems in the Israelite community which were then traced back to the founder himself, Moses. The Lord appears at the Tent and bestows Moses' spirit (power) on those gathered in the camp. Eldad and Medad, though not at the camp, nevertheless receive the spirit and, therefore, the authority to speak for the Lord. The scene resolves the following theological question: Can the Lord bestow the prophetic spirit on someone apart from the leader? Moses' reply to Joshua is that the prophetic gift should not be restricted or limited. In fact, Moses goes so far as to wish that the Lord grant the spirit to everyone.

In his denunciation of the rich, the author of James resembles a prophet like Amos. He reminds his audience of the dire punishments awaiting the rich who have abused the poor. He also holds out hope to the poor oppressed by such rich people. Like the Old Testament prophets, he indulges in reversal of imagery: Gold and silver that corrode; Moths that have consumed the wardrobe. The Lord is the God of the poor. Hence, he hears the laments of the farmhands who have been denied their wages. More disconcerting is that the rich have stooped so low as to murder. The Lord will not remain uninvolved.

Mark's Gospel is a series of sayings which Jesus used to complement the second prediction of the passion. In the first saying (vv. 39-40), Jesus resists all "in-group" arrogances. God's power is not limited to the Jesus clientele. An outsider's performance of a miracle in Jesus' name is not an attack on Jesus (see Acts 19:13-14). In the second saying (v. 41), anyone who merely offers a drink of water will not be forgotten. No one has any right to despise a person who takes Jesus seriously. In the third saying (v. 42), Jesus returns to the little ones (the simple believers — see Mk 9:33-37). The millstone is a powerful image for expressing the heinousness of leading astray those who totally depend on God.

In a final cluster of sayings, Jesus uses the image of mutilation to emphasize that

obedience to God and sharing community with him have priority over everything else. "Gehenna" comes from the Hebrew "Valley of Worthlessness." It is a valley just south of Jerusalem where human sacrifices had once been offered (see Jer 32:35). It later became the city dump for Jerusalem. Hence, the reference to the perpetual fire. The last verse borrows from Is 66:24, which speaks of Gehenna's filth and smoldering fires. Once again, an apt image for the need to obey.

Our God is an inclusive God. The disease of the human condition attempts to set limits on God. We allow him to function in only a few people, usually the "in-people." We determine theoretically which manner of speech God will use and how he will conduct himself through such people. Somehow or other, we have forgotten that our God is a master of disguises who manifests himself beyond our power to control. To restore God's freedom to operate in and through a variety of people means to acknowledge that our God is an inclusive God.

The communication of the prophetic spirit posed a problem in Israel. There were those who thought it could be handed on only through institution. The tradition in Numbers is a freeing experience for Israel. The story demonstrates that Israelites can receive the spirit apart from Moses. The God of Israel is not constrained to follow only one manner of communication. In Numbers, our God is an inclusive God.

Mark preserved a tradition for his community to demonstrate that God can function through others apart from the "in-group." To expel demons in the name of Jesus is not limited to the group surrounding Jesus. Mark is suggesting for his community that the wrong question is: How can I set limits to God's goodness? He maintains, rather, that the right question is: How can I recognize God's unbounded goodness in others? For Mark, our God is an inclusive God.

The other Christian communities which develop Christian tradition reveal a many-splendored God. The Jewish community, which preaches the Old Testament God of compassion and concern, articulates a many-splendored God. The non-believers, who give evidence of God's presence through their talents and efforts for others, manifest a many-splendored God. All people who reflect dedication to the common good communicate the presence of a many-splendored God. Our God will not be coerced or restrained in the sharing of goodness through people. Our God is an inclusive God.

Eucharist deals with our many-splendored God under forms of bread and wine. Eucharist elicits the faith response of the community. At the same time, Eucharist challenges that community to respond in faith to the other presences of God in everyday life. Eucharist reminds the community that it must not set up limits for God's manifestation. Eucharist thus asserts that our God is an inclusive God.