

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time - B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Numbers 11:25-29

The book of Numbers is a narrative account running from the 2nd year after the Israelites left Egypt up to almost the end of Moses' life: a total of about 39 years' wandering in the wilderness. It takes its name in the Hebrew Bible from *bammidbar* (which means "in the wilderness"). The Greek translation (the Septuagint) however, calls it "Numbers," and the Latin follows suit. The title "Numbers" is really less than satisfactory, because the counting of the people doesn't take up much of the book. The book is really a history of the main events of the wanderings in the desert.

The book begins with God's express command to Moses to make a census of the people (thus, Numbers). The effect of this census shows that God has indeed kept His promise to Abraham (Genesis 22:17) "I will indeed bless you, and I will make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore: your descendants shall take possession of the gates of their enemies". The seventy member family of Jacob which had entered Egypt, now, some 450 years later, numbers around 600,000.

The Book of Numbers divides into 3 parts:

- 1) In Sinai (chapters 1-9);
- 2) The Journey Through the Wilderness (chapters 10-21); and
- 3) On the Plains of Moab (chapters 22-36).

Today's reading comes from the account of the journey through the wilderness. About eleven months after they arrived at Sinai, the Israelites broke camp and set out on their journey to the promised land, carrying the Ark of the Covenant and the Tabernacle (a tent) and the associated ritual vessels and vestments. As usual, some of the voyagers are grumbling about the food. Moses becomes frustrated and talks with God about it: "**'Why do you treat your servant so badly?'** Moses asked the LORD. '**'Why are you so displeased with me that you burden me with all this people? Was it I who conceived all this people? or was it I who gave them birth, that you tell me to carry them at my bosom, like a foster father carrying an infant, to the land you have promised under oath to their fathers? Where can I get meat to give to all this people? For they are crying to me, 'Give us meat for our food.'** I cannot carry all this people by myself, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you will deal with me, then please do me the favor of killing me at once, so that I need no longer face this distress'" (Numbers 11:11-15). God told Moses to gather seventy elders and that He would spread the burden of the people among them so Moses would only have to bear a portion. Moses gathered the seventy around the meeting tent.

²⁵ The LORD then came down in the cloud and spoke to him. Taking some of the spirit that

was on Moses, he bestowed it on the seventy elders; and as the spirit came to rest on them, they prophesied.

This is understood as an ecstatic or charismatic phenomenon (1 Samuel 10:10-13; 19:20-24) rather than becoming prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc.

²⁶ Now two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad, were not in the gathering but had been left in the camp. They too had been on the list, but had not gone out to the tent;

The tent was located outside the camp.

yet the spirit came to rest on them also, and they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ So, when a young man quickly told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp,” ²⁸ Joshua, son of Nun, who from his youth had been Moses’ aide, said, “Moses, my lord, stop them.” ²⁹ But Moses answered him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of the LORD were prophets! Would that the LORD might bestow his spirit on them all!”

The acknowledgment of Eldad’s (his name means “whom God has loved”) and Medad’s (his name means “love”) prophetic charism, over the objections of Joshua, serves to protect the independence of the prophetic gift from those who would subject it to institutional control. Note the parallel with Luke 10:1ff where seventy are commissioned to act as an advance party for Jesus’ arrival as He traveled.

2nd Reading - James 5:1-6

This week we complete our study of the Epistle of James in this cycle. In fact, the Sunday readings won’t contain James again until the 3rd Sunday of Advent in Cycle A. The main purpose of this epistle is the teaching of morality and self-discipline. The sacred writer speaks with great severity, not mincing his words, in order to make people see that actions of the kind he condemns are incompatible with the profession of the Christian faith.

In today’s reading the author again criticizes the sins the well-to-do. He reproves their pride, vanity and greed and their pleasure seeking; warning them that the judgement of God is near at hand.

People who are well-to-do should use their resources in the service of others. In this connection, the Church teaches that “They have a moral obligation not to keep capital unproductive and, in making investments, to think first of the common good. . . . The right to private property is inconceivable without responsibilities to the common good. It is subordinated to the higher principle which states that goods are meant for all” [Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (22 March 1986), *Libertatis conscientia*, 87].

^{5:1} Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Luke 6:24).

² Your wealth has rotted away,

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal.” (Matthew 6:19).

your clothes have become moth-eaten,

Fine clothing was the principal form of wealth in antiquity. Greed is one of the seven deadly sins. A greedy person offends against justice and charity and becomes insensitive to the needs of his neighbor.

³ your gold and silver have corroded,

Although gold doesn't corrode (rust, tarnish), this indicates the basis worthlessness. “Spend your money for brother and friend, and hide it not under a stone to perish” (Sirach 29:10).

and that corrosion will be a testimony against you; it will devour your flesh like a fire.

This is possibly an allusion to fuel for the fire of judgement in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15; Hebrews 12:29.

You have stored up treasure for the last days.

A reference to the Day of Judgement. Can also be translated “You have laid up treasure in the last days” which is consistent with the thought that the coming of the Messiah signaled the beginning of the end times and judgement was near at hand. A belief which became fact for the Jews in A.D. 70.

⁴ Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers who harvested your fields are crying aloud,

Cheating workers of their earnings was already condemned in the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15; Malachi 3:5). It is one of the sins which “cries out to heaven” for immediate, exemplary punishment; the same applies to murder (Genesis 4:10), sodomy (Genesis 18:20-21), and oppression of widows and orphans (Exodus 22:22-24)

and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

“Lord of Hosts” is a common Old Testament name for God (Isaiah 5:9).

⁵ You have lived on earth in luxury and pleasure; you have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter.

Again, a reference to the Day of Judgement (Jeremiah 12:3).

⁶ You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous one; he offers you no resistance.

Saint James may be alluding to Sirach 34:22 “He slays his neighbor who deprives him of his living: he sheds blood who denies the laborer his”. This may also allude to Wisdom 2 and 3 where the godless plot the destruction of the righteous poor man (especially Wisdom 3:3-5:16).

Comment: Since we are leaving the Epistle of James as our second reading, a few words of closing are in order. The central teaching of this letter is the consistency between faith and works. This teaching was accepted unquestionably up to the time of the Protestant Revolt, when this text was seen as an insurmountable obstacle for the theory of justification by faith alone. From that point onward, in Protestant circles, the claim is made that James was written as a correction to what St. Paul says in Romans 3:20-31 and Galatians 2:16; 3:2,5,11. Let’s compare what Romans 3:28 and James 2:24 say:

(Romans 3:28) “**For we consider that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”**

(James 2:24) “**See how a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”**

Although the terms used (“faith” and “works”) are identical in these two verses, the perspective is different and there is no contradiction or correction necessary. For Saint James, “works” are acts of morally correct behavior. For Saint Paul, “works” are the legal works of the old law (circumcision, ritual washing, animal sacrifice, etc.) all of which were burdensome, and/or costly, and ineffective. They no longer have validity because Jesus has instituted the New Law (Covenant) to fulfill the old one. St. Paul says in Galatians 5:6 that faith works through love and St. James says that we must live out that faith because of the love.

The Catholic Christian does not do “good works” because he is compelled to do them, but because he is impelled by the Holy Spirit to do them. The doing of “good works” does not earn a place in heaven, heaven is only open to those who live the life of Christ in its fullness. Works done grudgingly or with the intent of “earning” salvation are ineffectual.

Gospel - Mark 9:38-43,45,47-48

The 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (2 weeks ago) Gospel reading contained the first of three

instructions to the apostles: “If you are to be a follower of Jesus you must deny yourself, take up your cross and follow in His footsteps.”

Last week we heard the second instruction: “If you wish to be a leader, you must remain humble and be the servant of all.”

This week we continue with this second instruction.

³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name,

This ties back to the preceding verse which we heard last week when Jesus said “receives one child such as this in my name” – this person is acting as Jesus’ emissary.

and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us.”

This incident addresses a problem that arose in the early Church (Acts 19:13): What do you do when non-disciples cast out demons in His name? Note the parallel with Eldad and Medad in our first reading.

³⁹ Jesus replied, “Do not prevent him.

Jesus’ tolerant attitude is based on the idea that if they recognized His power, and acted as His representative, they would be slow to speak ill of Him (1 Corinthians 12:3).

“Some who are intent on severe disciplinary principles which admonish us to rebuke the restless, not to give what is holy to dogs (Matthew 7:6; 15:26; Mark 7:27), to consider a despiser of the Church as a heathen, to cut off from the unified structure of the body the member which causes scandal (Matthew 5:30; 18:8-9; Mark 9:42-48), so disturb the peace of the Church that they try to separate the wheat from the chaff before the proper time (Matthew 13:29-30). Blinded by this error, they are themselves separated instead from the unity of Christ” [Saint Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 413), *Faith and Works*, 4,6].

There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. ⁴⁰ For whoever is not against us is for us.

This is a generalization, in proverb form, of the teaching in the preceding sentence (see also Matthew 12:30). Through these three verses Our Lord warns the apostles, and through them all Christians, against exclusivism: the notion that “good is not good unless I am the one who does it” (see also Philippians 1:15-18).

⁴¹ Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward.

Note that here the situation of the previous verses is reversed: now someone is doing a kindness to the disciples because they recognize that they are Jesus' emissaries. Note the parallel with welcoming a child for His sake in last week's gospel (verse 37).

⁴² "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,

This is the catchword for the remainder of this reading. The "little ones" may well refer to members of the community of the disciples; just like the little child of verse 36.

it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire.

According to 2 Kings 23:10, the Hinnom valley (the Hebrew is *ge Hinnom*) had been used as a place for child sacrifice to Molech (see Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5-6). Although the term Gehenna originally described the valley to the southwest of Jerusalem which, because of its defilement, became a garbage dump with continually burning fires, it came to be synonymous with the place of torment for the wicked (2 Esdras 7:36; Enoch 27:2; 90:24-26). This is not sheol/hades/purgatory; the place of the dead/Abraham's bosom.

⁴⁴ Verses 44 and 46 do not appear in the New Revised Standard Version, Revised Standard Version, Revised English Bible, New American Bible, New Jerusalem Bible, New International Version or Good News Bible. They do appear in the King James and New King James Versions and are identical to verse 48: "*Where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched*". The reason for the difference in translations is that these verses are not in the best ancient manuscripts and are thought to be scribal additions for reasons of symmetry.

⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna. ⁴⁶ ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna,

The structure of the sayings is the same in verses 43, 45 and 47. If one part of the body causes you to sin, cut it off in order that you may enter life/the kingdom and avoid Gehenna. This is a communal metaphor and serves to exclude members of the Church, the Body of Christ, who give offense. It is not a literal saying as the hand/foot/eye is not the cause of sin; weakness of will is.

⁴⁸ where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'

Jesus' words are based on Isaiah 66:24 where Gehenna with its filth and smoldering fires is described. The child sacrifice in the valley of the son of Hinnom was instituted by King Ahaz. This institution is described in 2 Chronicles 28:1-3. Often "their worm does not die" is explained as the eternal remorse felt by those in hell; and "the fire is never extinguished" as their physical pain. At any rate, the punishment in question is terrible and unending.

"This is no trivial subject of inquiry that we propose, but rather it concerns things most urgent, and about which many inquire: namely, whether hell fire has any end. For that it has no end Christ indeed declared when He said, "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched". Yes, I know a chill comes over you on hearing these things. But what am I to do? For this is God's own command. . . . Ordained as we have been to the ministry of the word, we must cause our hearers discomfort when it is necessary for them to hear. We do this not arbitrarily but under command" [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 392), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 9,1].