

Scripture Speak: Whoever Is Not Against Us

by **GAYLE SOMERS**



Today, Jesus teaches us about two kinds of separation from Him. The contrast between them couldn't be starker.

Gospel (Read Mk 9:38-43, 45, 47-48)

St. Mark tells us about an episode in which someone who was not part of the entourage of Jesus' disciples was "driving out demons" in His Name. St. John and the other apostles "tried to prevent him" because of his outsider status. Isn't this curious? We don't know anything about this person. Why didn't he follow Jesus publicly? How did he have the same kind of authority over demons that Jesus had given His disciples (see Mk 6:7, 12-13)? We never get any answers to these questions. All we know is this: "Jesus replied, 'Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in My Name who can at the same time speak ill of Me. For whoever is not against us is for us.'" What a strong statement! What did Jesus mean?

Although St. John thought it was highly irregular for someone to do a mighty deed in Jesus' Name without publicly traveling with Him, Jesus saw

something more important. He saw someone who had complete faith in the Name of Jesus to conquer demons. He saw someone who cared enough about the terrible suffering caused by demonic possession to want to do something about it. This must have been someone well acquainted with Jesus' ministry. Had he personally witnessed an exorcism in His Name? Had he himself been one of the many, many people in the Gospels whom Jesus delivered from a demon? These are strong possibilities. Then why didn't he travel with the other disciples? Did he have family responsibilities that prevented him? Had he seen something in the behavior of the apostles that had soured him on the value of joining this group? Was his ability to understand the call to radical discipleship compromised by conditions beyond his control? We don't know. We do know that Jesus did not see this man as a threat to His mission. Jesus was content with the man not being against Him; He was thankful that because the man drove out demons in His Name, he would not, at the same time, speak ill of Him. Simple actions done for Jesus, such as giving a cup of cold water to His disciple, will, in eternity, be rewarded. God alone sees the secret intention of the heart; no act of charity goes unnoticed. And God, alone, decides who is a recipient of His Spirit and His gifts.

Jesus wanted His disciples to be lenient and charitable to those who discipleship was unwittingly incomplete. However, He had very different words for those who, with full knowledge of what they are doing, sin **consciously**, especially those in a position (like the disciples) to cause others to follow their example. That person's ultimate fate, apart from repentance, is grim indeed—the unquenchable fire of Gehenna, or hell. So serious is this threat that Jesus exhorts all of us to great vigilance, using Semitic hyperbole to make His point. If any of our bodily actions (doing, going, seeing) cause us to sin, we are to vigorously mortify it. Radical self-denial in this life is much better than an eternity spent in radical self-absorption, without God and without hope of repentance.

How ironic that Jesus called for mercy and humility when we think of the failings of others but for startling violence against the sins that bedevil us.

Possible response: Lord Jesus, I know You want all Christians in Your one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. Help me be charitable toward those who, for whatever reason, remain outside that full communion.

Whoever First Readings (Read Num 11:25-29)

Our reading comes from the time when Moses, overwhelmed by the care of so many of God's people on their journey to the Promised Land, needed help. God directed him to choose seventy elders of Israel (see Num 11:14-15) upon whom He would pour His Spirit, enabling them to speak God's word as Moses had done. They were all to go outside the camp to the "tent of meeting," which was the place where God and Moses regularly communed. Apparently, two of the men who were "on the list" didn't go out to the tent. Although they remained in the camp, the Spirit fell on them, and they were able to prophesy like the others. This greatly upset Joshua: "Moses, my lord, stop them." How reminiscent this is of our Gospel scene. See that Moses, like Jesus, was not bothered about what had happened. He didn't ask any questions about why Eldad and Medad hadn't joined the larger group. We, however, do wonder about this, don't we? These men were among those known to be elders among the people "and officers over them" (see Num 11:16). Because of that, God had chosen them to be part of His gift of help to Moses. Would it have been better for them to show respect for and solidarity with Moses by going out with him to the tent? Yes, of course. That would have blessed them in their calling. We don't know why they didn't go. They may have been disappointed in Moses (remember that this was a time of great stress among the people—see Num 11:10). They may not have thought themselves worthy of such an honor. So many possibilities! Moses, however, was glad for their ability to help him. He didn't want Joshua to be jealous on his behalf: "Would that the Lord might bestow His Spirit on them all!" This was no time for fault-finding and nitpicking. The work of God needed many able bodies.

Many centuries later, Jesus would echo this same sentiment: "Whoever is not against us is for us."

Possible response: Heavenly Father, forgive me for the times I have judged those I considered unworthy to receive Your gifts.

Psalm (Read Ps 19:8, 10, 12-14)

After extolling the perfection of God's Law, the psalmist reflects on the reality that sometimes we commit sin unwittingly—out of ignorance or lack of good examples or a blindness that isn't willed. See how he describes this: "Though Your servant is careful of them [God's ordinances], very diligent in keeping them, yet who can detect failings?" We don't always know when

we, ourselves, are missing God's best in the choices we make, so we certainly aren't qualified to know that for others. Our prayer should be, "Cleanse me from my unknown faults!"

On the other hand, we all know our susceptibility to commit the sin we **do** know is wrong. Jesus spoke about our need to be on guard against that in the Gospel. So, for this danger, our prayer should be, "From wanton sin... restrain Your servant; let it not rule over me."

To live our lives with God requires wisdom, revealed so well in His Word—the Scripture, the sacraments, and the teaching of the Church. These become our sure path to joy: **"The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart."**

Possible response: The psalm is, itself, a response to our other readings. Read it again prayerfully to make it your own.

Second Reading (Read Jam 5:1-6)

St. James, a kinsman of the Lord, was the bishop of the Church in Jerusalem. His flock was largely Jewish Christian converts. The letter he wrote was addressed to "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (see Jam 1:1), which meant that it was directed to Jewish Christians who lived outside of Jerusalem, throughout the Greco-Roman Empire. We can see in his writing a heavy influence of Old Testament prophetic fire. Even just a casual reading of Isaiah or Jeremiah or any of the other prophets will show that they minced no words in warning the Jews to repent and live the Covenant God had made with them.

St. James, in our reading, warns against the coming misery for the rich who oppress and exploit the poor. This was a common failing among Old Testament Jews, and it would be one of those sins that Jesus described in the Gospel as needing radical mortification in order to avoid a disastrous end. This sin is full of knowledge and intention; no Jew could plead ignorance of it. St. James' vivid description of its ultimate punishment helps us understand why Jesus spoke so strongly about not letting sin gain a foothold in us.

Sobering, isn't it?

Possible response: Lord Jesus, help me mortify any impulse that wants to make my situation better at the expense of someone else.