

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2021

When I was studying for my psychology degree, I had to do an observation on children at play. I remember this assignment very well as it threw up some interesting results. There were a number of children under 5 years of age playing in a garden, I observed that one child, who had been playing happily until another toddler took the toy truck he had been playing with, did a wobbly. 'My truck, my truck. He's got my truck!' were his screams as he went off on one. Even the nursery nurse couldn't pacify him as she attempted to explain that the toys were to be shared and they were for everyone. Eventually, after sulking for a while the little boy returned to the group his tantrum having run its course.

In today's First Reading from the Book of Numbers Moses speaks to God about the heavy burden of his responsibility to care for the people's material and spiritual well-being. In response Yahweh appoints seventy elders to aid Moses in teaching the people and assisting with their needs. When God put His Spirit upon the elders they received an initial anointing of the Spirit of God to show the people they were divinely appointed. Two of the seventy elders, Eldad and Medad, were for unknown reasons, not present. Perhaps they were ill or caring for a child or relative. Whatever the reason, God did not penalise them for their failure to attend the gathering and the divine anointing at the Sanctuary and He blessed them with His spiritual anointing. This annoys Joshua, the servant of Moses. When he complains and advises Moses to stop them, Moses replies: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that the LORD might bestow his spirit on them all!" The lesson is we must not criticise or be jealous of God generously bestowing His spiritual gifts. Eldad and Medad not being part of the publically anointed ecclesial community of elders did not prevent God's Spirit from manifesting Himself to them. God's Spirit is without limit and blows where it wills. The Spirit of Gods is a gift for the building up of everyone in the community and there is no place for childish objections to God's abundant generosity.

In today's Gospel an unnamed man's success sparks jealousy amongst the Apostles, who were unsuccessful in casting a demon out of the boy earlier. Jesus's point in telling John and the others to let the man heal in His name is that the ministers of His Kingdom are not "exclusive" but "inclusive." There is no room for jealousy in the spiritual warfare necessary to advance the Kingdom of the Messiah. This incident is reminiscent of Joshua's complaint to Moses in the First Reading. Joshua complained that two men in the camp who had not received Moses's special anointing were also filled with the Spirit of God and were prophesying in the Israelite camp. Moses rebuked Joshua in the same way Jesus rebuked John.

Perhaps these two texts can help us understand the work of God's Spirit in The Church today, The Jewish leaders reacted to Jesus' ministry very much like Joshua to the election of Eldad and Medad, a childish reaction arguably of arrogance and jealousy. However, in contrast Jesus himself, when alerted that the disciples had seen others casting out demons in his name, responds: 'If they are not against us they are for us!', reminding the Apostles that they could and should not stifle the work of The Holy Spirit.

Today, rules and regulations continue to attempt to stifle the work of the Spirit and like Joshua, The Jewish Leaders, the disciples and indeed the boy in the observation want to control what is the common gift of the Christian Community, namely The Holy Spirit working in each one of us. Where there is a need to bring Good News to the broken in society should our concern be who is addressing that brokenness or more importantly that the brokenness is being addressed? Surely, this is a much more mature attitude towards those in need and indeed our brothers and sisters of other Christian Churches.