

The Twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Numbers 11:25-29
<i>Response</i>	The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 19:8, 10, 12-13, 14
<i>Second Reading</i>	James 5:1-6
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Your word, O Lord, is truth; consecrate us in the truth.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

The Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time continues our journey through the Gospel of Mark. In this week's readings we look at a gospel that's very sobering, very serious, but very important, and that's Jesus' teachings on hell, which he refers to with the Aramaic word Gehenna. So before I jump into the gospel, just as a kind of preface, I think it's really important to notice that although in our own day and time the topic of hell, the idea of eternal separation from God, has become very unpopular, it's important to remember that in the gospels, if you look at the New Testament in the gospels as a whole, Jesus actually speaks about the fires of hell, the punishments of hell, the reality of Gehenna more times in the Gospels than the rest of the New Testament combined. So this is really an important issue in the teaching and preaching ministry of Jesus Christ, so it needs to be important for us as well, however unpopular it might be. So what we're going to do today is look at what he has to say about this reality, and then try to make sure we understand it in it's First Century Jewish context and in light of the tradition and the official teaching of the Catholic Church. So the gospel for today is from Mark as I said, but in this case we're looking at Mark 9:38-48:

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward.

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.¹

Okay, very sobering words from Jesus. What do they mean? What is he trying to say here? How can we understand it today? Let's walk through a couple of points. First, notice that this section of Mark's gospel begins with the apostles, in this case John, being concerned because they see someone performing exorcisms, casting out demons in the name of Jesus but he's not one of the apostles, he's not one of the 12, he wasn't chosen by Jesus, he has not been commissioned by Jesus. It's interesting here because Jesus basically says, don't worry about that, don't stop him from casting out demons, "For no one who does a miracle or mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me." So it's interesting here, you'll look, Jesus goes on to clarify that that's what he means because he says, "For he that is not against us is for us." So what he seems to be saying here is that the Spirit of God is at work in this person, they're calling on my name. Yes, they're not yet in full visible communion with us and with you apostles, but don't worry. If this man is casting out demons in his name, he's doing it in some way through the grace of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit. It kind of parallels what Paul says elsewhere when he says in one of the letters, no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. So there's a sense in which the grace of the Holy Spirit, the grace of God, Jesus is recognizing that it's operating in this man even though he's outside the visible confines of the chosen apostles — we might say today even though he's not in full visible communion with the Apostolic circle of Jesus' disciples. At the same time, Jesus is saying he won't be able for very long to speak evil of me. In other words, the Spirit is going to lead him to the fullness of

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

communion with us, so don't worry about him, don't forbid him from doing this good action, which is casting out demons in the name of Jesus just because he's not within the visible circle of the apostles.

Then he says something interesting at the end there. He says, "Amen, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward." So here he's describing a kind of openness and hospitality to the authorized apostolic missionaries, in this case John or the 12, as also a sign of God's grace at work in someone. So if this person is casting out demons in my name, doing a good work, and he's animated by the Spirit, he will be open to the apostles, he'll be hospitable to the apostles, and he'll receive his reward. So this is an interesting passage because elsewhere in the gospels Jesus seems to say the opposite. At one point in the gospels Jesus says, "Whoever is not for us is against us", and here he seems to be saying whoever is not against us is for us. And the reality of the fact is that from a certain point of view both of those things can be true on different occasions. In this case Jesus is the one who is discerning that this man is carrying out a good action through the power of the Holy Spirit. He's not actually against us, ultimately he will be with us and he is for us. In other cases though, what we're going to see is that Jesus is going to demand that people support him and follow him, and if they don't do it they're going to end up being his opponents, they're going to end up being his adversaries, they're going to be impediments to the spread of the gospel. So both of those things can be true on different occasions and with different individuals and it takes Jesus to kind of guide the apostles through the various situations as to which is the case in any given instance. In this case the man is actually operating through the grace of the Holy Spirit and through the power of Christ.

Alright, so that's a fascinating opening passage. We're going to come back to this principle in just a moment when we look at the Old Testament reading about these two elders who received the Spirit of God even though they're not amongst the appointed numbers of the 70 that Moses chooses. So just hold that thought for a second. For now though I'd like to keep going with the gospel and look at what Jesus has to say about Gehenna and the fires of hell. So in this case, Jesus makes... the next statement he makes has to do with scandal. So after describing his apostles as emissaries of Christ, to whom if you show hospitality you won't lose your

reward, Jesus now uses a different image for those who believe in him. He describes them as little ones, *mikros*, which can mean someone who's small or powerless or humble, but it can also be an image for a child, right. Here Jesus says, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea." What is Jesus getting at here? He's talking here about the gravity and the seriousness of sin and in particular of the sin of scandal, wherein one person's sin leads another person astray, leads someone else into sin. You can see here Jesus is describing his own disciples as little ones, those who believe in him. That's how he identifies the little ones, and he says if someone scandalizes one of my disciples and leads them astray, causes them to sin, it would be better for that person if a "great millstone" were tied around their neck and they were cast into the depths of the sea.

Now you don't need to know anything about First Century Judaism to know that that is a very violent and unforgettable image of the seriousness of sin and of the seriousness of scandal. Just the idea of having a stone tied around your neck and thrown into the ocean and drowning is a clear image of a violent death. However, we tend to miss though the nuance of what Jesus is getting at here because he doesn't just say any kind of stone. In the Greek it's a great millstone. The Greek word is *mylos onikos* and it literally means a donkey stone or a donkey millstone, because there were different sizes of millstones in antiquity. What millstones were used for was to grind grain and to make flour. So what you needed was a very heavy kind of stone that could crush the wheat and crush the grain and then make it into flour.

Now you could do this with a handheld millstone, which would be a smaller item, but if you wanted to grind a lot of it you would use a large millstone, or a great millstone, that would actually be pulled by a donkey, right, and these would weigh hundreds and hundreds of pounds. Some scholars, there's different estimates here, will say it might even weigh over 1000 pounds; these are large stones. So when Jesus says a donkey millstone being tied around your neck and cast in the sea, that millstone will be so heavy that if it were actually tied to someone's neck and you were cast with it, it would decapitate you. This is an extremely violent image for the severity of scandal and the severity of that kind of sin. It's also unforgettable,

it's one of Jesus' favorite techniques as a teacher. He uses what's called hyperbole, in other words an exaggeration, an unforgettable image, a very shocking image in order to make you remember his point. So this image, and this is one of those statements that to this day people remember the image of the millstone being tied around your neck and cast into the sea. So in other words, for Jesus of Nazareth, scandal, leading other people to sin, leading other people to engage in sins that would pull away from God, is something we absolutely want to avoid at all costs. This is very, very serious, and he doesn't stop there. He continues to discuss the gravity of sin, although he shifts the emphasis now from leading someone else astray, leading one of these little ones astray, to our own individual culpability for sin. Here Jesus gives the famous imagery of... if your hand causes you to sin cut it off, if your foot causes you to sin cut it off, and if your eye causes you to sin pluck it out, because it's better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with just one eye or one foot or one hand than to have both your eyes, both your feet, and both your hands and be cast into the fires of hell, or more literally the fires of Gehenna, right.

So let me pause there for a second. The Revised Standard Version translates the word here as hell, but actually in this case the New American Bible, which is used in the Catholic lectionary in the United States, is a better translation. It actually engages in a transliteration, which means it takes the Greek word as it stands. The Greek word here is *geenna* and the New American Bible just transliterates that as Gehenna, the fires of Gehenna. The reason I like that translation as Gehenna rather than hell is because it carries the connotations that the word would've had in a First Century Jewish setting. In First Century Judaism, Gehenna was not just a name for the eternal place of punishment after you die, it was actually a word that was derived from a real place, an actual geographic site, the valley of Hinnom. So Gehenna comes from the Greek *gé*, meaning land, and *chéna*, which is from the word Hinnom, so literally the land of Hinnom. The land of Hinnom is mentioned in the Old Testament. It was a valley to the East-Southeast of Jerusalem where in the Old Testament, like in the Book of Jeremiah 7, lots of horrific sacrifices and occultic activities, the worship of pagan deities, involving human sacrifice as well, were carried out. So it became a defiled place. So for example in the Book of Jeremiah 7, the valley of Hinnom is mentioned as an accursed place where they would even offer human sacrifice to the pagan god Molech, who was one of the deities of the Canaanites, who was a very, very wicked deity and who required his

people to worship him through child sacrifice. So not just human sacrifice, but offering babies to Molech. So these activities would be carried out in the valley of Hinnom, and what eventually happened was the place was considered accursed because it had been a place of basically pagan worship, human sacrifice, and demonic activity. So over the centuries the valley of Hinnom not only came to be known as a place of wickedness, it also came to be the place where the inhabitants of Jerusalem would bring their garbage as well as their filth, right, the sewage, so to speak, of the city. They would bring it out to the valley of Hinnom and it would be a place that was always on fire, because there they would burn their trash or burn their garbage or burn the dung from the city. So it was kind of a living visible symbol of a place of perpetual fire and a place also of perpetual separation from God because such heinous activities had been carried out in the valley of Hinnom.

So with all that background in mind, Jesus takes that contemporary term of Gehenna and he uses it as a metaphor for the realm of the damned, for the realm of those whose sin has separated them from God for all eternity. So that term Gehenna comes down into English to us as hell, the place of the damned, the place of eternal torment. It's important to note that there are two things that Jesus says about the fires of Gehenna that are worth highlighting. First, in verse 44 he refers to it as unquenchable fire. Well what does that mean? That means that the pain of separation from God in this realm of the damned never ends, right. It's not just a place of fire, it's not just a place of temporary fire or temporary purification, it's a place of unquenchable fire, right, it's an everlasting place of punishment. If you have any doubts about that, look at the second dimension. If you skip down to verse 47 Jesus says here again, he says it would be better for you to lose one of your members than to be thrown into Gehenna "where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched." So what does that mean? Well there's two images here. First, the image of the worm not dying is an image of perpetual corruption. The worm is an image that gets used in the Old Testament to refer to the corruption of the grave, the corruption of the body, right. Sometimes we'll talk about someone being worm food or being eaten by worms; it's a visceral image for the corruption of the human body in the grave, right. So he says the worm doesn't die there. In other words, it's a kind of perpetual death or perpetual corruption and the fire is never quenched. In other words, it's a place of perpetual pain or perpetual punishment. It's worth noting here, Jesus isn't just making those images up, he's

actually quoting from the Book of the prophet Isaiah. So although it's not a reading for today, if you go back to the book of Isaiah 66, Jesus gets this imagery for Gehenna, for hell, from the greatest prophet of the Old Testament, and not just the greatest prophet, but the end of the book of the greatest prophet of the Old Testament. So Isaiah has 66 chapters and the last verses of the Book of Isaiah describe the punishment of the opponents and the enemies of God in this way. Isaiah says in chapter 66, verse 24:

And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched...

So Jesus here is quoting the Old Testament Book of Isaiah and taking those two images of perpetual corruption and death, and perpetual punishment, and using them to impress upon his audience the reality and the permanence of eternal separation from God, in the realm of the damned that we call hell, and that the Jews called Gehenna.

So let me just press pause there for a minute before we move on, move any further. It has become popular in recent years — in fact I just saw the other day someone commenting on this — to say the Bible isn't that concerned with the fate of individuals, and it certainly isn't that concerned with the whole issue of hell. That's something that's a medieval concern that the Catholic Church has made up, but if you look at the Bible itself, the Bible isn't really worried about the individual fate of believers or the eternal punishment of individuals. I have to respond to that claim, and just point out, that is completely false, right. Not only is the eternal fate of individuals a major priority of Scripture as a whole, it's a major priority of Jesus himself, right. Again, no one talks about Gehenna or hell in the New Testament more than Jesus himself. He speaks about hell more times than the rest of the entire New Testament combined, precisely because Christ loves every single human being, because he doesn't want any human being to spend eternity separated from him and separated from God and to experience the pain of that eternal separation, which he's describing here through the images of fire and eternal corruption and eternal, everlasting death. I mean these are serious, serious issues here. So Jesus is drawing on Jewish tradition, using Jewish images to describe this spiritual reality of eternal separation from God and he's essentially telling us in the gospel for

today, do whatever it takes to avoid being separated from God forever. Do whatever it takes to avoid ending up in the fires of Gehenna rather than the kingdom of God.

You might have noticed that too, what is the antithesis of Gehenna? What is the opposite of Gehenna? Well Jesus said, it's better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with both eyes to be cast into the fires of Gehenna. So these are the two possible fates for every human being, we can either enter into the kingdom of God and be with him forever, or we can enter into the fires of Gehenna and be separated from him forever. Those are the two possibilities that every human being has to stand before, and Jesus is saying if anything impedes your entry into the kingdom of God, if there's any obstacle to you being united with God forever in an eternal union of communion and happiness and joy, then you have to root out that obstacle, you have to cut off that impediment to entering into the kingdom of God, you have to drive out whatever might separate you from the love of God and the love of Christ. So that's why hell matters. Hell matters because salvation matters, right. So it's nonsensical to say Jesus wasn't concerned about hell and that he was only concerned about salvation. No, both of those realities are real possibilities for every human being and the reason Jesus talks about hell so frequently and with such fervency and with such shocking images here is precisely because he is gravely concerned about the eternal fate of every single individual and every single human being that's ever been created. That's the reality of the gospel for today.

Okay, with all that said let's go back to the Old Testament now. What is the reading for today? Well in this case the Old Testament reading is from the Book of Numbers, and it's chosen not so much with reference to Jesus' teachings on Gehenna as it is with reference to that opening discussion of the man casting out demons in the name of Jesus but not being in full communion with Jesus' apostles. So if you go back and look at Numbers 11:25-29, this is a very famous passage but it's worth reading, and we'll kind of see the connections pretty clearly once we do. So it says this:

Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was upon him and put it upon the seventy elders; and

when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did so no more. Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested upon them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." And Joshua the son of Nun, the minister of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, forbid them." But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!"

Okay, so you can see the connection here. What's taking place is that Moses is establishing a circle of elders, a circle of leaders, a kind of hierarchy within the Israelite community. So he has chosen these 70 elders so that they might assist him in the work of ministry, and he calls down the Spirit of God upon the 70. Now it just so happens that two of these elders, Eldad and Medad, are not actually gathered with the rest, they are in the camp rather than at the tabernacle when the Spirit of the Lord comes down, and yet at the same time the spirit descends upon them and they too began to prophesy, so it causes a problem because Joshua and others in the camp are upset because they have received the spirit of prophecy within the chosen number of the 70, and yet these two extra people have also received the spirit of prophecy even though they weren't gathered together for the official, you know so to speak, anointing of the 70. What's fascinating about this passage is Moses' reaction to it. He basically says don't worry about that, I wish everyone, I wish all 600,000 of the Israelites had the spirit of God upon them and that they would all prophesy. The fact that these two figures, Eldad and Medad, have received the spirit outside the visible confines of the chosen 70, it isn't a problem, it's actually a blessing.

So what is the message of that text? Well I think it's interesting because obviously it's been chosen here to shed light on Jesus' words in the New Testament. What does it show us? Well on the one hand there are visible structures of authority that are established in the Old Testament by Moses and in the New Testament by Jesus, right. You have the 70 elders in the Old Testament here in the Book of Numbers. You have the 12 elders in the tribes of Israel in the Book of Exodus. The same

thing is true in the New Testament. Jesus establishes 12 chosen apostles around him in the Gospels. He also chooses 70 apostles in the Gospel of Luke 10 to be commissioned by him, to be sent forth with authority in order to cast out demons and to preach the gospel and to perform exorcisms, that kind of thing, and those visible structures of authority are important and they're real. At the same time, Jesus is stressing to us just as Moses did in the Old Testament, that although God has bound salvation to the visible structures that he himself establishes, he is not bound by those same structures and the spirit can sometimes, in extraordinary ways, work outside of those visible confines — although always of course in communion with the authoritative leaders of the church, right. It's not like Eldad and Medad are going to go set up their own church, they're working in union with Moses and the elders of Israel but they are extraordinary members of that college. They've received an extraordinary act of grace in being able to prophesy. So I just highlight this because I think it's an important principle of ecclesiology, of the theology of the church, that we'll need to remember, not just for Moses or Jesus, but throughout church history. We will see both that the church has authoritative structures that are established, like the college of bishops, the presbyterate, right, all the official leaders of the church, but that doesn't mean that the Spirit of God is limited to working within those visible confines. God's grace can operate outside of those things, as we see in the gospel today where a man is casting out demons in the name of Jesus, although he's not actually an official member of the 12.

Okay, with those connections between the Old and New Testaments in mind, I'd just like to bring our discussion today to a close by actually looking at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the official teachings of the church on the question of hell. I do think this is something that is a stumbling block for a lot of people. There are a lot of people who wonder these days, does the church still teach that hell is a reality? What is the official doctrine? In this case I'll call your attention to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1033-1037. There are some really important texts here on the reality of hell and I'd just like to read what the church says in her official teaching. I'm going to focus on paragraph 1036. This is what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches:

Jesus often speaks of “Gehenna,” of “the unquenchable fire” reserved for those who to the end of their lives refuse to believe and be converted,

where both soul and body can be lost...*The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity.* Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, “eternal fire.” The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.²

So you notice there a couple things the Catechism says. First, Jesus speaks about Gehenna frequently. So in other words, this isn't some marginal teaching, this isn't some occasional reference of Jesus, this is a central teaching of Jesus, the reality of Gehenna, the reality of hell. That's the first point. Second point, the teaching of the church affirms not just the existence of Gehenna but also its eternity. In other words, the church is very clear here that hell is not a temporary state. It's not just a place where we're kind of passing through, but that those who enter into Gehenna, that those who enter into hell, the place of the damned, never get out. It has an eternal reality to it, it's an eternal separation from God. Third element here, and this is really important, that the way people enter into hell is by dying in a state of unrepentant mortal sin. So if you die in a state of unrepentant mortal sin, the eternal destiny of a person is separation from God forever. And with that separation, finally, the chief punishment of hell which most of us think of, you know the worst thing about Hell is going to be the physical pain I experience, you know we kind of think of the fires of hell, but the Catechism is really interesting here, it says that the chief punishment is actually the pain of separation from God, of being separated from God for all eternity and losing the happiness and the life for which we were all created, and for which we long as human beings.

So I just end with that quote there, something to pray with, something to ponder. The reason hell is such an important topic and such a central topic for Jesus is because we were made to be with God for all eternity, and the reality is that if we choose Gehenna rather than the kingdom of God, we will have to experience the pain of eternally being separated from the one for whom we were made. So I'd just like to end with the reflection on the fact that the reason hell is such an important topic for us to wrestle with is because it's real, because it's the truth, and just like

² CCC 1034-35

Jesus teaches us the truth of the kingdom of God, the truth about marriage, the truth about what it means to be a human being, he also teaches us the truth about our eternal destiny, and about the fact that because he has given us free will, we can either love God, seek to love him, and to love our neighbor and enter into the life of the kingdom of God, and eternal happiness, and eternal communion with him; or, if we so choose, we can enter into a realm where we will be separated from God and from our neighbor for all eternity, in a pain that can only be described through the imagery of eternal fire and eternal death, where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. So at the end of the day, the reason hell matters and the reason Jesus puts so much emphasis on it is precisely because he loves us so much, because he loves every human being. That's the reason that he goes to the cross, so that ultimately through his passion and death and resurrection we might be saved from the fires of hell, and saved from eternal separation from him by becoming members of the kingdom of God.