

Personal Notes
061001 Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time 137B
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Personal responsibility for saving one's own soul is the message in the Lectionary readings for this Sunday. The message is that communication with God happens not only through the formal religious bureaucracy but also directly. There is an underlying message both to and from the Magisterium. The message to the Magisterium is not to abuse the Faithful, especially children; the message from the Magisterium is that the Faithful also have a direct link with God.

To anticipate the readings, before developing them in detail, in Numbers 11:25-29, two of the elders prophecy, even though they do not follow bureaucratic procedure, like that of a magisterium. Psalm 19 is one of the most beautiful prayers ever written. The message is that the Faithful can join the cosmos in nature praising God, taking responsibility without a magisterium. Interestingly, the aspect of the cosmos in Psalm 19:2-7, is omitted from all five the Lectionary readings that use this psalm.¹

The Epistle of James shows that worldly glamour, whether religious or not, is separate from following God's Holy Word. In Mark, Jesus admonishes the Faithful not to worry about whom God touches but to take responsibility for how they treat the vulnerable, like children, rather than the powerful of the world, like the hierarchy. Now these passages will be examined in detail.

In Numbers 11:29, Moses responds to Joshua, the straw boss, "Are you jealous for my sake?" The issue is the bureaucratic authority of Moses. The greater issue is that Moses was wise enough to know that he could not rule Israel alone. He needed the help of the elders. Moses wanted a bureaucracy to help him and God obliged.²

The Lectionary does not include that part of Numbers 11:25 that records that the elders never prophesied again. With sloppy scholarship, the Lectionary omits noting this omission in the reference to Numbers 11:25.³ The hierarchic message proclaiming love of the truth becomes distorted with such sloppy scholarship. Power

¹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, The Roman Missal Restored by Decree of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican and Promulgated by Authority of Pope Paul VI: Lectionary for Mass: For Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America: Second Typical Edition: Volume I: Sundays, Solemnities, Feasts of the Lord and Saints (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998).29B, page 183; 41ABC, page 335; 69C, page 527; 105C, page 706; and 137B, page 861 (today).

² John R. Levison, "Prophecy in Ancient Israel: The Case of the Ecstatic Elders," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 65, No. 4 (October 2003) 504, 507, 511, 512, 515, 519, 520.

³ John R. Levison, "Prophecy in Ancient Israel: The Case of the Ecstatic Elders," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 65, No. 4 (October 2003) 504.

exercised for the sake of power is an unacceptable ideal. Humility with a willingness to share power is as necessary as the message proclaiming love of the truth. Moving on, Psalm 19 explains how to deal with the humiliations of who gets what (such as translating the Lectionary), inherent in the religious life.

The key is the Responsorial Antiphon, Psalm 19:9a, “The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.” Love is the precept of the Lord. This means that someone with a vocation to an enclosed cloistered group, like Poor Clare nuns, can obey cheerfully out of love of God. In the religious life, obedience in little things, for which one has greater responsibility, such as respecting the bells that regulate how one comes and goes, make obedience in big things, for which one has less responsibility, such as deciding who should be abbess, take care of themselves.

Praising God is the big personal responsibility of the religious life. The sense of praise emanating from the universe toward God is missing in the Lectionary verses. Ever since the time of Galileo, cosmic reality does not require the Magisterium to praise God. These verses are fundamental for understanding why J. Ross Wagner proclaims that Psalm 19 is “one of the greatest lyrics—and most moving prayers—ever written.”⁴ Unlike cosmic reality, the Faithful can refuse personal responsibility and subvert their praise of God into praise of material wealth.

Concerning the verses used in the Lectionary today, Wagner quotes M. A. Fishbane, that the motivation for Psalm 19 is the “desire to be forgiven for covenantal transgressions ... set within a larger praise of God as lawgiver and creator.”⁵ Psalm 19:8-11 draws intimately close to God by using his name, Yhwh, six times in verses 8-11,⁶ all six of which the Lectionary uses, with the word LORD.

The Lectionary translation about “The law of the Lord” is misleading. The better translation is “The Torah of Yhwh.” Wagner explains, “Torah is probably best understood here in its wider sense of ‘teaching,’ ‘instruction,’ rather than in a narrower sense of ‘legal stipulations’ or even ‘the Pentateuch.’ The Lectionary “decree of the LORD” is better translated as “the testimony of Yhwh.”⁷ The relationship is loving, rather than one-sided and dictatorial.

⁴ J. Ross Wagner, “From the Heavens to the Heart: The Dynamics of Psalm 19 as Prayer,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 61, No. 2 (April 1999) 261.

⁵ J. Ross Wagner, “From the Heavens to the Heart: The Dynamics of Psalm 19 as Prayer,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 61, No. 2 (April 1999) 248.

⁶ J. Ross Wagner, “From the Heavens to the Heart: The Dynamics of Psalm 19 as Prayer,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 61, No. 2 (April 1999) 255.

The antiphon is verse 9a. Verse 9b, about light, has special meaning for Poor Clares. “The commandment of Yhwh is brilliant, giving light to the eyes.” The omitted verse 11a fits in well with James. That verse reads, the ordinances of Yhwh “are more desirable than gold, than fine gold in abundance.”⁸

The Epistle of James 4:11—15:11 addresses the praise of material wealth, such as gold, to denounce it in “the eschatological judgment of God, the lawgiver and judge of all.”⁹ James 5:6 reminds the Faithful that the rich in the material goods of this world have condemned the righteous one, who offered no resistance. James means that the Faithful are to do likewise. Offering no resistance is another way of encouraging religious to follow their vow of obedience. With the great exception of the current sexual cover-up scandal of the hierarchy, religious superiors as matter of course never ask their subjects to commit sins.

Issues like birth control and stem cell research are not going away with dreaming by the powerful. What is required is academic freedom on the part of moral theologians to examine all available options. Once the theologians are free to develop their insights, the hierarchy needs to take their research seriously. Presently, the hierarchy appears to confront research into moral theology with already made up closed minds. As a result, life goes on and passes by the powerful church leaders, emptying both churches and schools. Part of the solution for the Faithful is prayer and fasting.

The secular aspect of doing the same thing in obedience that those with religious vows do, is significant. In order to survive, people do what they are told and accept humiliation. Their reward may be a paycheck at the end of the week. Love of both self and family can make such obedience and accompanying humiliation easy. I have in mind the HBO movie, “Cinderella Man,” about the Great Depression Era boxing career of James J. Braddock. Religious have a far greater reward than a paycheck at the end of the week, that may help explain why Poor Clare nuns enjoy responding, “May God reward you” for good deeds. Jesus said, “Amen, I say to you,

⁷ J. Ross Wagner, “From the Heavens to the Heart: The Dynamics of Psalm 19 as Prayer,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 61, No. 2 (April 1999) 254.

⁸ J. Ross Wagner, “From the Heavens to the Heart: The Dynamics of Psalm 19 as Prayer,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 61, No. 2 (April 1999) 254.

⁹ Timothy Johnson, review of Luke Leuk Cheung, The Genre, Composition and Hermeneutics of the Epistle of James in the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 66, No. 4 (October 2004) 642.

whoever gives you a cup of water ... will by no means lose his reward" (Mark 9:41).¹⁰

Mark 9:42 is about good deeds toward children. The sexual scandals of the hierarchy demeaning parents and children trying to cope in court are distressing. The point is that the hierarchy is not the only group able to reach God. Other groups such as the N.A.A.C.P., S.N.A.P., and "Call to Action" also take direct responsibility for communicating with God. That is how to understand Mark 9:39, "Jesus replied, 'Do not prevent him [from driving out demons in my name].'" Just because bureaucratic procedures are not followed, does not mean God is not present.

These readings are about saving one's own soul, with a certain amount of self-confidence that one can and must take personal responsibility for forming one's own conscience, about what is right and wrong. These readings recognize that love, rather than bureaucratic procedures hold the key to owning one's own soul. Jesus, like Moses before him, is more concerned with the relationship between his followers and God than the relationship between his followers and bureaucratic strategies. Psalm 19, in prayer, and James, in admonition;¹¹ concern the same reality about a loving relationship between God and the Faithful.

I intend to include the following comment in the Appendix, after revising it once more here.

The Sunday Lectionary is organized into three-year cycles, A, B, and C. In general, the Lectionary numbers sequence as 1A, 2B, 3C. The readings for this Sunday, 137B, therefore, are in cycle B.

Each set of Lectionary readings is usually divided into four parts: First Testament, Psalm, Epistle, and Gospel. The Epistle is the letters of Saint Paul, with an occasional letter from James, or Peter, or John. In current practice, Sunday preaching is only on the Gospel. Why, I do not know.

Cycle A follows the Gospel of Matthew, B Mark, and C Luke. John is interspersed for special occasions, like Easter and Pentecost. The Epistles follow their own

¹⁰ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "The Poor Widow in Mark and Her Poor Rich Readers," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 53, No. 4 (October 1991) 601.

¹¹ Timothy B. Cargal, review of Patrick J. Hartin, James, in the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 66, No. 4 (October 2004) 649.

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pattern, with little, if any, regard for the accompanying First Testament, Psalm, or Gospel. These Notes, however, always find a relationship among all four readings.

These Notes annotate the Biblical index derived from the Catholic Biblical Quarterly. That means the Notes do not rest until every new reference finds a place, in one way or another. These Notes are currently working their way through the cycles a second time. This means that usually there are Notes posted on the web that already treat the readings. For example, Notes for 2006 already exist from 2003. In addition, each of Notes appears in both .htm and .pdf formats. Pdf is meant for reading; .htm for indexing. The various search engines read .htm more readily than .pdf.

These Notes repeatedly recognize passages that the Church uses at funerals and in pastoral care of the sick. The reason is to gain an appreciation for the liturgy should it become available in times of bereavement and illness.

For more on sources see the Appendix file. Personal Notes are on the web site at www.western-civilization.com/CBQ/Personal%20Notes