

**Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B
(Oct. 1, 2006)**

Cut Off Your Hand?

You know, sometimes the good news sounds more like bad news. I couldn't blame you if that was your feeling after listening to the second reading from St. James and the words of Jesus in the Gospel.

James writes his letter probably in the middle sixties, therefore not thirty years after the death of Jesus, but already there are problems in the Christian community, and, like Paul, James does not hesitate to speak very strongly about them. Last week we heard him admonish those who were not living up to their responsibilities to the poor and the needy among them. This week he has some tough things to say about the wealthy who have made an idol of their riches. They have let greed and avarice come between them and God.

The words of Jesus in the Gospel seem even harsher. Talking about cutting off your hand or foot or plucking out your eye if they are what stand in the way. Obviously this is not to be taken literally. Jesus is not recommending mutilation. Not that mutilation is always wrong. After all it's perfectly permissible to cut out a cancerous eye, a mangled hand or a gangrenous foot. Indeed it's necessary for the well-being of the body. But Jesus is not talking about our bodies. He is talking about our immortal souls. "Better for you to enter into eternal life crippled or blind than to be thrown into Gehenna with your riches and vices and things that stand in the way."

When we hear Jesus talking this way, in such imaginative and concrete language, we have to remember that he is a Jew who lived in Palestine in the first century. His way of expressing himself here is typical of the culture in which he lived – very forceful and exaggerated. But it's exaggerated for a purpose. It's almost as if he is saying: Listen carefully because what I am saying is very important.

In the sixteenth century St. Ignatius Loyola would begin his Spiritual Exercises with what he called the first principle and foundation. It was a basic and simple statement of some fundamental Christian Spirituality. He

put it this way or in words to this effect: You and I, all of us humans, are created to praise, reverence, and serve God, and by so doing to grasp our destiny: life with God, days without end. He follows this by saying: Everything else on this earth is intended by God to help us achieve this end. And what is Ignatius' iron-clad conclusion from this? Therefore, he says, we are to use the things of earth in so far as they help us towards that end, rid ourselves of them in so far as they obstruct us. What Ignatius says is much less colorful than Jesus' "cut it off" but it is basically saying the same thing.

Now notice that neither Jesus nor Ignatius start with something negative. Their first premise is always positive. For Jesus it was Love, love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves. For Ignatius it was praise, reverence, and service of God and neighbor. Only after that do they say: if something gets in the way, cut it out.

If we really and truly believe in the God of Jesus Christ that *is* the only reasonable thing to do.

Now, dear friends, across the centuries we Catholics have been accused of a negative approach to life this side of the grave. And many of us have lent warrant to such a charge: in religion some people think of us as sad sacks. Mass is an obligation; the faith is one endless series of don'ts. Don't do this, don't do that. Lent has meant "give up," and holiness says "cut it off." For ages we have prayed to Mary, "To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears." Doesn't sound too joyful, does it?

Of course the cross is a constant in our lives. But we are less than Catholic if we fail to see that "cut it off" is not mutilation but liberation. It frees us to love God with every fiber of our being. We are missing the depth and the thrill and the joy of Catholic living if Christ is present to us only in church, if we fail to carry him from Communion to the concrete and glass outside, to the condo and the slum, to our desk and to our bed – in a word to the men and women who people our days.

Love God above all else and we won't have to worry about how we carry Christ to where we live and work and play. It will be second nature, as easy as breathing. All we will need is to be ourselves for that self will be Christ. It won't all be fun – after all, Jesus himself did not laugh on

Calvary. But I can promise you a delight in human living that will only grow richer as we grow grayer, a fascination with our creation that will rival the breathless day when God looked on all that God had made and saw that it was very, very good.