

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

Whose Side Are We On?

Everybody likes to be on a winning side, don't they? We always want our team to win. It's natural, isn't it? It doesn't matter whether it's the Redskins or the Nationals or our high school or grammar school team. In fact we may even be playing on one of our school teams and aren't we terribly disappointed when our team does not win? Of course we are.

And you can apply that to other different situations. Big corporations want to win that lucrative contract. Politicians want to win that important election. In time of war we want our side to win and it's extremely humiliating if it turns out that we have to admit defeat.

So of course we often call upon God to help us. We always presume that God is on our side. And it doesn't make any difference who you are, that's always the presumption. We are right. Therefore God must be on our side. It gets to be kind of sticky in time of war. For instance right now we have Muslims, Jews, and Christians all fighting one another and all claiming that God is on their side. So whose side is God on?

There is a wonderful story told of Abraham Lincoln. You know Lincoln was apparently a very religious man although he did not belong to any particular church, but he seemed to know the Bible very well. According to the story, during the middle of the Civil War, in 1862, one of the northern leaders asked the president for prayer that God would be on their side. Lincoln responded, "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side, my concern is to be on God's side."

I wonder if Lincoln was thinking of today's Gospel when he said that. We hear how the disciples complained that a man was expelling demons in Jesus' name. They were indignant because he was not of their group or part of the mission of Jesus. But Jesus tells them the man is really on their side because he is doing a good work. By his action the man expelling demons was really on God's side.

We hear much the same thing in the first reading from the Book of Numbers. Seventy elders of the tribe are assembled for something like an

anointing or ordination ceremony when the Spirit was poured out on them and they began to prophecy. But two of them were not present for the ceremony. Yet they began to prophecy as well. So some of the people became upset since these people were not at the ceremony and complained to Moses. They told him, "Stop them. They are not on our side." Moses said something similar to what Jesus said. What they are doing is good, so it must be inspired by the Spirit and in that case it would be foolish to stop them. In fact he even went so far as to say, "I wish the Lord would bestow his Spirit on everybody." He might have added, "That would be a sign they were all on God's side whether they seemed to be part of our team or not."

Well there are some obvious lessons here. One that just leaps right out at us is the danger of prejudice and preconceived notions, especially trying to second guess God, presuming that we know how God is supposed to act and being hugely disappointed if God surprises us and acts differently

The Letter of James and the rest of the Gospel passage give us some instructions about how we are to live if we want to be sure that we *are* on God's side – and I'm afraid they don't sound too pleasant or upbeat. The good news in this case seems more like bad news, and I would not blame you one bit if you were somewhat disturbed by what you heard. "Cut off your hand; pluck out your eye; cut off your foot!" Good heavens! What is that all about? Well, it's typical of Jesus when he wants to make a point. He exaggerates. It's as though he were saying, "Pay attention. I'm saying something that is extremely important and I want you to listen to me." It's like the time he said, "Anyone who does not hate his Father, Mother, Brothers, and Sisters, and his own life as well, cannot be my disciple." Does he really want us to hate our family? Of course not. Any more than he wants us to mutilate ourselves so we won't go to hell. What he is saying is quite simply: nothing is more important than being my disciple. Nothing is more important than doing what I ask you to do. And what does he ask us to do? Love one another. Love your neighbor as yourself or better still, love one another as I have loved you. And remember, Jesus loved us to death quite literally. And there is no greater love than that.

So, whose side are we on? Whose side do we want to be on? Will we pray that God be on our side or will we with the grace and love of God live in such a way that we will always be on God's side?

St. Augustine once said, "Love God and do as you please." Well, understood correctly what he is saying is if we truly love God then what we please to do will always be what is pleasing to God and then of course we can always be sure that we are on God's side.