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Hunger, thirst for justice

Mary M. McGlone | Sep. 30, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

They say that for the ancient Greeks, the ultimate curse was insatiability. Hearing that, we tend to think of an unquenchable appetite for food and drink. In truth, physical hunger and thirst may be among the least of the gluttony issues for the Christian community. Today?s readings bring us to reflect on prestige, power and wealth as cravings that can be extremely detrimental to our individual and communal following of Jesus.

Ordinary Time

5-29

James 5:1-6

Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

The reading from Numbers relates a chapter in the life of Moses. One of the greatest figures of the Hebrew Scriptures, Moses, like many other great ones, was a reluctant prophet and leader. When he was called, he tried to wiggle out of it; avoiding mention of the fact that he was a murderer in hiding (Exodus 2:11-15), he tried to convince God that nobody would believe him. God then bestowed on him miraculous powers (Exodus 4:1-9). But Moses, whether from self-deprecation or reluctance to return to the scene of his crime, insisted that he was too slow of speech to speak on God?s behalf. Eventually, of course, God won: Moses, with the help of Aaron, led his people out of slavery, but not without continual problems.

As we encounter Moses today, his most recent troubles have led him to complain about the people, insisting that he couldn?t continue as nursemaid to God?s unruly and grumbling children (Numbers 11:1-15). To help him, God gave others a share in Moses? charisms for leadership. With that, a new problem originated. Because God?s gift was not restricted to those who gathered in the appointed place, jealousy reared its head; a runner arrived tattling on two prophets back in camp who had not followed the rules. Refusing to be taken in by their pettiness, Moses showed his willingness to share leadership, saying that he prayed that all the people would receive such gifts from God. Moses eye was fixed on the mission, not on his rank.

Our reading from James shows him following the lead of the Hebrew prophets. He proclaimed that the wealthy have dug their own graves, where they, like the goods and treasure they have hoarded, will soon be obliterated. We need to remember that it was not their wealth that condemned them, but the fact that they stockpiled it only for themselves. James highlights the fact that they could not possibly use it all and, in spite of enjoying such extraordinary surplus, they cheated their laborers.

What does his message have to say to us who may not have a great store of gold in the basement or moth-infested furs in the closet? Throughout his letter, James has been quite clear in calling the community to

recognize that God is the source of all gifts, that the Christian has a special obligation to the poor, that faith must manifest itself in works of justice, and that jealousy and unbounded ambition destroy the community and are the seeds of war.

We are beginning autumn, the time when nature begins her slow descent toward winter sleep. This passage from James suggests that while others are harvesting, this is a perfect time for us to review our budgets and storage bins, to see what we have that others need more than we do, and to give away at least some of what is good, but not essential to our well-being.

While James focused on material wealth, Mark?s Jesus refocuses our attention on the message we heard in the first reading. Now it is John who is jealous of someone whom he saw as impinging on the exclusive privilege of the apostles. This is one of those incidents in which a hapless apostle spoke up only to leave himself wide open to Jesus? critique. John expressed his distress at the fact that others ?who don?t follow us? were using Jesus? name to exorcise demons.

Both the vocabulary and the content of his complaint expose his error. Poor John unwittingly admitted that he thought workers for the kingdom should have been following not Jesus, but ?us,? ranking himself and the disciples with Jesus and greater than all others. His grievance demonstrated all too clearly that his focus was on authority and prestige rather than the mission. Jesus warned his disciples against the scandal of clinging to rank and honor rather than making the spread of the kingdom their priority. As we hear these readings proclaimed, we need to take a good look in the mirror, asking ourselves how easily we might distort our Christian vocation by allowing our appetite for goods, prestige or power to override our hunger and thirst for the kingdom and its justice.

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