

TWENTY SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (9/26-27/2009)

Numbers 11/25-29, Psalm 19, James 5/1-6, Mark 9/38-48

Who really speaks for God?

Is it the pope, acting with the Church's authority?

Is it the televangelist who uses the media to get his or her message across?

Is it the self-proclaimed prophets who seem to know everything and don't hesitate to tell you what you are supposed to do about it?

Does the priest preaching at Sunday Mass speak for God (even when his homily is poorly put together and ultimately boring)?

It is an important question that demands an answer because it has a major influence on our relationship to God, to His word, to His commandments.

For instance, Jesus speaks harshly in today's Gospel: *"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off...if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off...if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out..."*

Our immediate question is: What on earth does he mean? Are we to take his words literally?

Along comes the Scripture scholar who reassures us that Jesus sometimes uses *hyperbole* to get his message across; it was a common practice in his times (and in ours.)

Hyperbole is an exaggerated way of speaking to make the point.

E.g., we might say, "I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse!" Or "I told you a million times not to do that!" (Now, what parent has ever spoken that way to their children?)

We use hyperbole often in our speech, but when it occurs in the Scriptures, we have to be very cautious because some people think every word in the Bible is to be taken literally.

Using hyperbole, Jesus was saying: "Do everything you can to examine the sources of sin in your life and to eliminate that sin."

The Scripture scholar, speaking for God in a way, reassures us of Jesus' intentions.

But how does the scholar know what Jesus meant?

Because he or she devotes much time to examining what Jesus says, and what he might have meant at the time he said it.

The scholars study the Aramaic language which Jesus spoke and they compare Jesus' use of words and phrases to the way others at the time used the same words and phrases.

Sound complicated? It is, and precisely because it is complex at times, we need an authentic voice to help us understand.

So who speaks for God? It all depends.

At various times, it is the scholar, the mystic, the saint, the priest, the layperson, the ordinary "Jane" or "Joe", the Pope, the bishops, the Church teaching, nature, etc., etc.

God's word can come from any place God decides to send it.

Moses knew that as we see in the story told in the first reading today.

Jesus knew it when he chided the apostles about their attempts to keep some well-meaning people out of their inner circle. He adds: *"Whoever is not against us is for us,"* and *"Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ...will surely not lose his reward."*

It's a great thing for God to continually communicate with us; just as important is the fact that we need to keep our eyes and ears open always for His message.