



THE NEW SHOFAR

The ways of God are mysterious and wonderful

Numbers 11:25-29 - Mark 9:38-48

Trinity 18

Balaam, What have I done to you??

Numbers eleven is worth reading in its own right as a great moral story. It is all about the will of God and the discerning of the will of God. Today's text highlights a key element of that narrative. Balaam struggles with listening to the divine will and prefers to go his own way in life. It is while fleeing God that his donkey sees an angel on the path, something Balaam is unable to see. After being given a good flogging, the donkey speaks to his master. Yes, speaking donkeys in the Bible! The point is the way God can and does use whomsoever and whatsoever is the best fit for the task at hand. Who would have thought God would use a donkey? Surely there were better prophets, wiser humans, priests and holy men and women at hand? But no. God chooses to have a donkey speak and he delivers a message Balaam does not want to hear.

It is this unwillingness to be open to the divine will that leads to a selective spiritual deafness on the part of believers. Israel's history is filled with examples of this kind of dilemma. It goes back to Abraham, is found in his sons, flows down through Moses and the prophets – Jeremiah even ended up cursing the day he was born because of the message he was given to preach. The Balaam series of narratives is a great example of the need to be listening to God as opposed to acting on the presumption we know best what it is God really wants. Deafness is a way of life for disciples when we do not have prayer, regular sacramental graces, the Scriptures and engagement with other believers forming the foundation for our everyday lives. Only then are we able to discern when God is speaking to us in ways beyond our wildest imaginations. The voice of God is calling us constantly. God is moving us on in ways we may not understand and is appearing to us in ways we often fail to comprehend. We sometimes “flog” the “messengers” – persons or situations – but God does not give up on us.

Do we follow the Twelve or do we follow Christ?

The Gospel is keeping its focus on the disciples and their failures. Here they have observed someone *casting out demons in the name of Jesus*. How dare they! These Twelve men have been called, chosen and sent out to preach Christ and here they are demanding those who follow Christ do so under *their* authority! As they themselves follow the Master. There can be no other way to be a follower of Jesus apart from their own way. No one else can be trusted. God would only be working through them, through the Twelve. There are no *donkeys of Balaam* here!

The response of Jesus is clear. There are alternative ways of being a disciple apart from the way the Twelve have been called, apart from the way the Twelve carry out their own vocations. Just prior to today's narrative, Jesus had been rebuking this same group of followers because of their failures in service of others, the lack of openness and receptiveness to God when they do not like

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the direction the faith community is being called to take. Now they are at it again. God could not be working through this man casting out demons for they have not been told about him!

This narrative reflects the real situation of Mark's own community where people were still struggling to work out who was "in" and who was not "in" Christ's Church. Is it measured by what they eat or do not eat? Whether or not they are circumcised? If they keep the Law of Moses or disobey it? Here is Mark's response – it is all about *living in the name of Christ*.

Do be a stumbling-block before one of these little ones!

The second part of our Gospel today follows on from its opening story. These *little ones* are not children but all Christians, all members of the Church. Mark here recognizes the way the greatest threat to the integrity, life and mission of the Church in his own time came from within the faith communities themselves. Persecution, martyrdom, rejection and all the woes that rained down on Christians from outside its ranks only served to strengthen the Church's mission. It brought believers together, forced them to centre their lives on the imitation of Jesus and empowered them through the working of the Holy Spirit. Nothing could stop a persecuted, marginalized Church from taking the Gospel to the very ends of the earth.

But fellow Christians can! And so. That is what Jesus is saying here. Note too the severity of his words. Utter annihilation is preferable to causing harm to the faith and life of a single fellow believer. To cause a fellow disciple, a brother or sister in Christ to fall, to leave the faith community is an incredibly serious sin. To act in an arrogant and sinful manner towards a fellow disciple in Christ, leading them to resort to sin and arrogance in reply – anger, gossip, revenge and other more petty reactions – is to bring damnation down on both. It brings the mission and ministry of that faith community to a tragic halt.

Pluck out your eye! Cut off your hand! Your foot!

These parts of the body are essential for a good, satisfying and happy life. But they are worth destroying for the sake of our eternal life with God. They represent those things we use to make our way in the world, to establish our place in the Church we are called to serve. They include our ideas, our love of our traditions, our personal experiences of God, our knowledge, our passions, everything we do in the world and bring to bear on our life as God's servants.

None of these are of importance when it comes carrying out the will of God. Sometimes we are being called upon to sit back, to remain quiet, to lift someone else up rather than to fight for the death for something we prefer, desire or demand. Graciousness, gentleness, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, patience and kindness are all far more effective in building up the Body of Christ, for they are ways of engaging with the grace of God through the works of the Spirit. Jesus himself modelled this Way through his willingness to die on the cross for us.

The alternative way is the way of the Stumbling Block. This is the way of anger, of jealousy, of political manoeuvring, of gossiping, laziness and of using the means and behaviours of the wider world of politics and business. If we are not prepared to *die* that others may *live*, then we are not one with the way of Jesus, are not collaborating in God's ongoing mission in the world.

In our Gospel we are warned: if we are not adding actively to our own faith community and adding "Gospel value" to the wider world, then we have lost the plot. It is not that God is no longer speaking to us. The reality is that God is calling but we won't accept God speaking through "donkeys".

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