

# **A Bible Bullet (aimed at the heart)**

Twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time, Cycle B  
Numbers 11:25-29; James 5:1-6; Mark 9:38-43, 47-48

The readings for this Sunday are heavy. We are instructed by Jesus to think of those who heal and cast out demons in Jesus' name as being for us even though people fit each other into categories, which build fences between us. The power of the Spirit which Jesus sent into the world was intended for all who would believe. In fact, a normal Christian life should be one that is powerful and fruitful because of the indwelling of the Spirit and the power of the name of Jesus. We are spiritually richer each day because of the witness and prayers of all believers throughout the world.

Jesus then offers a caution that seems to be directed particularly at those believers who are in sensitive positions where their examples could be a threat to young seeds of faith. As teachers, parents and grandparents we must realize how very much this includes our witness within this community of believers, especially the children. Whether we like it or not, what we say and do easily become standards of measurement for those who look to us for examples. We must nurture these little ones in their growing faith just as we nurture them in their academic and social development. This is often accomplished by what we show rather than by what we know.

Eternal punishment is threatened in both Mark and James this week. The term "Gehenna" is often translated to "hell", but for the Jews of Jesus' day it possessed a vivid history. It is a form of the word Hinnom. The valley of Hinnom was a ravine outside Jerusalem which had a history of evil. It was the valley where pagan sacrifices were offered in the days of Elijah the prophet. In fact, Israel's King Ahaz sacrificed his own sons there in a pagan ritual. Manasseh continued

heathen worship there. When finally a righteous king, King Josiah, rose to power over Israel, the place was labeled as unclean. It was set apart through the years as a place for the burning of the refuse of Jerusalem. As a result it was foul, worms bred on the garbage there, and a stench rose from it as the fires sought to consume its vile remains. For every Jew, this was a hideous picture for a place of punishment. Such would be the result of breaking God's law. Avoiding Gehenna would be worth any sacrifice; real happiness and peace would be worth any self-denial for a devote Jew.

So, how do we bring these teachings together for ourselves this week? We could conclude with the very literal message that if we lead others astray we will go to hell, especially if the "other" is a child or a believer young in faith. Or, perhaps we are being asked to be accepting of other Christians who do not practice exactly as we do. I think the lesson is more of a soup of teachings than an entree. I think Mark is telling us that our greatest challenge will not be in judging the righteousness of the faith and witness of another, but in keeping our faith and witness true through actions and words. This is how we prophesy. Others will know the God we show. We can be instruments in creating God's kingdom on earth by what we say and do, or we can be instruments of its delay. It's a moment-by-moment choice. It is our greatest challenge.