

26th Sunday of the Year

Year B

God's Spirit In The World.

We praise God for all his prophets: men and women of every nation and creed who have resisted evil and manifested the Spirit in their lives.

(Readings: Numbers 11: 25-29. Are you jealous on my account? If only the whole people of the Lord were prophets! James 5: 1-6. Your wealth is all rotting. Mark 9: 38-43, 45, 47-48. Anyone who is not against us is for us. If your hand should cause you to sin, cut it off.)

Competition is an aspect of life in which we are all involved. We seem to be born with an inherent inclination to compete. And if we're not actually born with it, we certainly develop it very early in life. Observe two children, each of whom wants to play with the same toy. One hangs on to it for dear life while the other, tries for all his worth, to pull it away.

Child Psychologists call that 'sibling rivalry.' Those of you who have two children are very much aware of it. Worse still, the more children one has, the more rivalry there will be. They compete for everything from toys to attention, and all other manner of things, driving their poor parents to distraction.

Fortunately, most children eventually grow out of it, but they never really outgrow the inclination to compete. They simply develop more mature, more subtle ways of expressing it. And that is a good thing. After all, we wouldn't want our children to lose their competitive spirit, what we most commonly refer to as a 'healthy drive', or 'natural ambition'.

Remove the desire to compete, and much of our excitement in life would disappear. Most sporting games simply wouldn't exist. Why bother to run races, or to swim faster than other people – why play football or rugby, or cricket unless both teams want to win? Without their competitive element, all manner of sport would be utterly pointless.

Take away the human desire to compete, and much of the personal drive and excitement would go out of life. Or again, without competitive motor sports, we wouldn't benefit from the technological advances and innovations that come from it. And more generally, progress in some of the most vital areas of living would grind to a halt without human contest.

So, no! We cannot condemn competition out of hand. But then again, neither can we say that competition is always a good thing. Consider parents who play off their children against each other, forcing them to compete for their love. That sort of competition is unkind at best, and wicked, even abusive, in the extreme.

There are times in life when competition, if not wicked, can very often, be selfishly ingenuous and puerile. Today's Gospel gives us an example of just such a time. John said to Jesus, 'Master, we saw a man who is not one of us casting out devils in your name; and because he was not one of us we tried to stop him.'

Here we have an example of the competitive spirit gone wrong. John saw what was, essentially, a good thing, an unnamed man using the authority of Jesus to help people to sort out their lives, and John was trying to stop him. He saw this man as a competitor, someone who was encroaching, even invading his territory. And, quite frankly, he didn't like it! But if he had taken the time to consider what the man was actually doing, he'd have realised that the man was actually on his side. It was as if John, and his fellow apostles, held a patent on the name of Jesus, and no one else had the right to use it.

So, what precisely was John's problem? Why, exactly, did he feel this man was competing with them? After all, they were both trying to help people. Did he, perhaps, think the man had no authority from Jesus? Who can really say? Either way, he and the Apostles should have been happy to get any help they could. That man was not a competitor; he was an ally.

In the same way, the Anglicans, or the Methodists, or the Free Baptists, or the Orthodox community in Colchester Town, are not our competitors. We may not do everything in quite the same way. Our doctrines, and our churchmanship may differ in some respects. But it seems to me that if they are casting out the demons of poverty, or of hate, if they are spreading the love of God, and helping people in any way, then, let us be grateful for them.

Nor are we in competition with the Pentecostal, or the Presbyterian Churches, or the Evangelical Charismatics, or the Jews, (Taliban and Al Qa'ida aside) not even with the Muslims or the Hindus, nor anyone else, if they are also, in love of their neighbour, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and caring for the needy.

We should be grateful for the work they all do because, as Jesus says, 'Anyone who is not against us is for us.'

And as Pope Benedict reassured the leaders of other religions in a famous address on ecumenism, back in October 2006, and as Pope Francis has reminded us, again and again, from the very beginning of his Pontificate, the Church exists to share the love of God, and to share it with the whole world. But of course, this is a huge job, one which cannot be completed, at least not any time soon. So, all those who are doing this type of 'Good Works' are our friends, not our competitors. It is also childish, even churlish, to compete when the real need is to give encouragement.

I cannot help but wonder what happened to the man in today's Gospel. – Did he stop? Or did he keep working? There's a strong hint in the story, that he was committed to the cause. Remember, John said, 'We tried to stop him', implying their efforts failed. Perhaps he did continue, but with a much heavier heart. In any event, he deserved a pat on the back, not a slap in the face.

There was no need for John to do that. He should have put his arm around him and said, 'You are doing a good job. Keep it up.' I am sure that the man would have walked with a lighter step and worked with even greater energy and enthusiasm. We need more people who encourage, rather than discourage others. Life's hard enough without people making it harder.

God didn't put us on this earth to compete against one another, but to work together. If we are aiming for the same goal, going back to the sporting metaphor, then we are not in competition, we are in the same team.