THE SECOND READING

What to treasure

All that the wealthy have accumulated won’t help them on the day of judgment. Such possessions are useless; they pass away. Only by acting with justice and compassion will people gain the wealth of heaven (Matthew 6:19-21, Luke 12:15).

The poor and the just

This passage draws on the language of the Old Testament prophets who repeatedly warned that God would punish those who oppress the poor. God’s concern for the poor was also reflected in Jesus’ ministry.

This letter also echoes the biblical wisdom tradition. James condemns those who oppress the just, the righteous one (v.6; see Wisdom 2:10f).

The day of slaughter

By oppressing the poor in order to accumulate their wealth, the rich reveal their indulgence and self-interest. Their hearts have grown fat on gluttony and greed, making them easy prey for God and his heavenly army (the hosts) when the day of judgment (slaughter) comes.
**Insiders & outsiders (vv.38-41)**
There were both Jewish and pagan exorcists at the time of Jesus. We don’t know if the man in this story was doing exorcisms for years or started doing them after he heard about Jesus. Regardless, he was using Jesus’ name to vanquish demons, but he wasn’t one of Jesus’ followers.

The disciples want to stop the man from drawing on Jesus’ power. They might be jealous: in 9:17-18 we learn that they failed to cast out a demon. Whatever their motivation, they think in narrow terms. Because the man hasn’t been with them, they think he should be treated as an outsider.

Jesus disagrees. By expelling evil the man has aligned himself with Jesus and God’s kingdom. Other people, too, might not know or understand Jesus, but their life-giving behavior reveals that they are fundamentally good (see Matthew 25:31-46).

**Better off dead (v.42)**
Verse 42 can also be translated “Whoever scandalizes…” The word scandal comes from the Greek word for obstacle or stumbling block. Jesus warns people not to place a stumbling block in the path of those who have faith in him. Such action could provoke a believer to sin or lose faith. God will deal so severely with those who cause such scandals that it would be better if they had swiftly died.

Millstones are giant stone wheels that crush grain into flour. They are so heavy that donkeys have to turn them.

**Cut off! (vv.43-48)**
After warning people not to lead others into sin, Jesus warns against allowing one’s self to sin. His vivid, hyperbolic language emphasizes the importance of taking radical action to avoid sin. It’s better to cut off something that feels essential to us than to be permanently cut off from God.

**Gehenna**
Gehenna was a valley near Jerusalem that had been the site of pagan sacrifice. By Jesus’ day it was a vast garbage dump. Jesus uses Gehenna in order to say, “You think it’s hard to stop committing that sin? It would be a lot worse to spend the rest of your life in burning, rotting garbage with only maggots for company.” The pain of cutting out a particular sin is far more bearable than that.

**THE GOSPEL READING**

**MARK 9:38-41**
1. How might the disciples have tried to stop the man from expelling demons?
2. How might the man have reacted to the disciples?
3. Why do you think the disciples objected to the man’s actions?
4. How might the disciples have felt when Jesus allowed the man to continue?
5. Who do you think of as an insider?
6. Who do you think of as an outsider?
7. How does Jesus redefine our boundaries?
8. Have you ever envied someone because of his/her virtuous behavior?

**MARK 9:42-48**
9. What are some examples of how a person could intentionally cause someone else to sin?
10. What are some examples of how a person could accidentally cause someone to sin?
11. In what ways are we affected when we cause someone to sin?
12. What are some things people have to cut or pluck out of themselves?
13. What do you need to cut out of your life?
14. Do you find Jesus’ imagery compelling?

**PRAYER**

*by Thomas Á Kempis*

God our Father,
we are exceedingly frail and disposed to every virtuous and gallant undertaking.
Strengthen our weakness,
we beseech you,
that we may do valiantly in this spiritual war.
Help us against our own negligence and cowardice, and defend us from the treachery of our unfaithful hearts,
for the sake of Jesus Christ.
Amen.