

The 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B
Isaiah 53:10-11
Psalm 33:4-5, 18-19, 20, 22
Hebrews 4:14-16
Mark 10:35-45
Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.
The Garaventa Center
The University of Portland

These days, there are a lot of new non-denominational churches that place tremendous emphasis on the cheerful aspects of the Christian message. They preach that God loves and cherishes everyone, and that if we return that love, we will be showered with blessings. God has a plan for each of us, and if we say yes to that plan, we will be filled with happiness and peace, and all our highest aspirations will be fulfilled. The new churches are popular with young professionals who have achieved a measure of financial and social success, and who are now seeking spiritual values. Worship services are informal occasions marked by enthusiastic singing and good fellowship. It is religion tailored for young people who are discovering the extent of their God-given gifts. They are strong, intelligent and attractive -- the privileged children of a powerful nation. They are aware of the wonderful opportunities that life affords them, and the awareness fills them with gratitude and enthusiasm.

All this is good. The Good News they have embraced is perfectly true, and it's marvelous that so many previously unchurched young people are discovering Christ. Nevertheless, I fear that, as often happens with new religious movements, in their enthusiasm for one aspect of Christian truth, they are neglecting other elements of God's revelation that are equally true, and equally essential to a life of faith. I'm thinking especially of what our tradition teaches about power, failure, and pain. I suppose

it's perfectly understandable for young, gifted people to want to brush aside these aspects of the Church's teaching as dated, gloomy, and irrelevant. But no human being, no matter how privileged, can evade these realities forever. And the danger is that when the crunch comes -- when they encounter personal tragedy, inadequacy and all the limitations that are part of life -- their edited version of Christianity will prove wanting. Will they conclude that their faith was, after all, only a pleasant delusion? It is also unfortunate that people destined to wield authority over the lives of others, should be ignorant of the profound insight about the nature of power that lies at the heart of the Christian message.

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) wrote, "Our life as Christians begins by being baptized into a death; our most joyous festivals begin with, and center upon, the broken body and shed blood. There is thus a tragic depth in our worship. . . . Our joy has to be the sort of joy that can co-exist with that." In other words, our Christian joy is tempered by the fact that Christ was crucified; just as our Christian grief is tempered by the fact that Christ is risen. Pain, is not a senseless negation of the Christian promise of salvation. Jesus himself took solace in today's reading from Isaiah: "Because of his affliction he shall see the light in fullness of days; Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear." Our suffering has *meaning*, because it is united with the suffering of Christ, to bring about the Kingdom of God.

As for power, Piers Paul Read (b. 1941) has written of the temptation to join with others "in sculpting the *world* to fit their dream. But. . .you cannot carve living tissue. You are left with a wound." Over the course of generations, countless idealists have sought power in the belief that by its exercise they could lead humanity to brotherhood and

happiness and peace. Invariably, their efforts have failed, with disastrous consequences. In our Gospel, when James and John ask to sit at Jesus' side when he comes into his glory, they are seeking power. Our Lord asks them, "Can you drink the cup I shall drink or be baptized in the same bath of pain as I?" In their enthusiasm and ignorance, James and John insist that they can. But Jesus responds, "Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest; whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all. The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve -- to give his life in ransom for the many."

Here we stand at the heart of the mystery. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, will succeed where countless powerful men and women before and after him have failed. He will bring salvation to humanity. But he will do it not through power, but through service and weakness and pain. He through whom the very universe was created, achieves his victory not by conquest, but by being nailed, broken and humiliated, to a tree. And if we, with all our talents and gifts, would better the world, we must be like him.

So, our tradition has crucial things to say about failure, power and pain. Any part of the Good News might lead us to discover Christ, but once we have pledged our life to him, we will require, over the course of a lifetime, the whole of his revelation as safeguarded and preached by the Church, to bring us safe into his Kingdom.