

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

1 Kings 19:16B, 19-21

Psalms 16:1-2, 5, 7-8, 9-10, 11

Galatians 5:1, 13-18

Luke 9:51-62

Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.

The Garaventa Center

The University of Portland

Last night I spent some time with a friend whose life, of late, has been burdened by a great deal of suffering and grief. In speaking about how she copes with these difficult circumstances, she said she has found consolation and inspiration in a particular quotation from the movie, “Shawshank Redemption.” A character in the film, who has been imprisoned for a crime he didn’t commit, sees himself as faced with a choice: He can “Get busy living or get busy dying.” My friend has chosen to get busy living. Our readings this week set the same stark choice before each of us.

In our Second Reading from the Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul frames the question in terms of flesh or Spirit. We must choose to live by one or the other. Now, when we encounter a reference to “flesh” in Scripture, we immediately think of “sins of the flesh,” and when we think of “sins of the flesh” we think of sexual sins. This is not the meaning that Paul intends. For him, the way of the flesh refers to the values that ordinarily govern human life in the world – the struggle to get ahead by any means necessary – the “law of the jungle” that characterizes our “dog eat dog” world. He warns the Galatians, “if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by each other.” To live this way, Paul tells them, is to submit to a yoke of slavery from which Christ has set them free. Played this way, the “game of life”

always ends in death. A cynical aphorism claims, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” The Christian response is, “He who dies with the most toys is still dead.”

When I lived in the UK I’d sometimes follow debates in Parliament. When a controversial measure was under consideration, the losing side would sometimes wring a concession from the winners. Yes, the bill would pass, but its implementation would be delayed for a year or two. The losers would then portray this delay as a kind of victory. I never saw the point. The result they dreaded was going to occur. Whether it happened now or in two years seemed immaterial. The same is true of the “game of life.” If we are deft players we might manage to postpone the inevitable outcome for a while, but the end is already ordained. The game ends in death.

When we meet Elisha in our First Reading, he appears to be winning the game. He is out plowing with twelve yoke of oxen and following the twelfth. He is young, strong, rich and good at his job. Yet, when Elijah throws his mantle over Elisha’s shoulders, Elisha is inspired to burn his yoke, leave his old life behind and follow the prophet. He abandons the game, and gets busy living.

Jesus lays out the same choice for us in the Gospel, in brutally frank terms: “Let the dead bury their dead. But *you* go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.” In other words, “You are following the way of the flesh. In effect, you are busy dying. Don’t be. I offer you life – life in the Spirit. Get busy living. Follow me. Now.