

30<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Exodus 22:20-26

Psalms 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51

1 Thessalonians 1:5C-10

Matthew 22:34-40

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

The Garaventa Center

The University of Portland

The national and international news, lately, has been awful. I'm tempted to offer a litany of wars, atrocities, scandals and epidemics to illustrate the point, but I suspect if I were to do so, I could fill the entire time I've allotted myself for this reflection, and might still fail to mention the particular horror that is causing you the most anxiety at the moment. Our first response to the situation might be to say, "What else is new? The news is *always* bad." But the truth is that this time feels different. This time it feels like everything we've taken for granted about our lives and our world is crumbling in our hands and falling through our fingers.

At times like these, we feel a powerful instinct to turn to our faith for solace. The instinct is sound because these are the moments our faith was "designed" for. These are the conditions under which Christians and Christianity thrive. For evidence, let's turn to our second reading from First Thessalonians. In the passage, Paul offers a paean of praise to the fledgling church at Thessalonica, lauding them for the marvelous things they are achieving in Christ. I'd like to draw your attention to a particular phrase in the reading – a phrase your eye might pass over entirely in good times. Paul writes, "And you became imitators of us and the Lord, receiving the word in great affliction, with joy from the Holy Spirit, so that you became a model for all the believers in Macedonia and

Achaia.” Did you hear it? The Thessalonians received the word with joy from the Holy Spirit “*in great affliction.*” It was precisely in circumstances of great affliction that the Thessalonians achieved prodigies for Christ. Sure, Christianity can be lived in good times, but that’s not what the faith is for. At best, it’s like using snow tires in the summer. They’ll get you where you’re going, but it’s not what they were designed for.

Think of what the Scriptures tell us about our Lord’s earthly ministry. Comfortable people who thought they were doing just fine on their own felt little attraction to Jesus’ words. It was the suffering, the outcast and the marginalized who turned to him in droves. They knew his message was for them. Cast an eye over a history book and be reminded what Christians have endured and transcended over the last couple of millennia. Think of Christians you’ve known who lived through the Great Depression or World War II. Remember how profound their faith often felt in comparison with our own. Was this because they were old fashioned? Or was it because their faith was forged in a crucible that you or I could not begin to imagine? (Or, perhaps, couldn’t begin to imagine till lately.)

So, how are we as Christians to respond in bad times? The answer is in our Gospel: Love God with your whole heart soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Okay, I know I’ve just lost some of you. You’re thinking, “Come on, there has to be more to it than that.” But that first reaction is dead wrong. Let’s look at the “love your neighbor” part in particular.

I was once on a ferry. The deck was crowded with men, women and children. In the midst of our journey there was a loud bang and a grinding sound. It was probably nothing, but nevertheless a tremor of fear passed through the passengers. Just maybe, something horrible was about to

happen. Almost immediately, a young fellow shouted, “Every man for himself!” He may have been trying to be funny, but I remember being angry at him. It seemed to me he had said precisely the wrong thing. If this turned out to be a real crisis, every man and woman needed to be not for themselves, but for each other, and the children. The rest of the journey was uneventful, but I had experienced something important.

Look, maybe the alarm many of us feel at the moment is false. Perhaps one day we’ll look back on these times as no better or worse than others we have passed through. Let’s pray that’s the case. But whatever comes, we can take comfort in knowing our faith affords us the resources we need to endure. It may even be that for us, as for the Thessalonians, “great affliction” will be the opportunity for us to live “in joy from the Holy Spirit” so that we may be “a model for all believers.” But that will only be the case if we are in it, from the beginning, not for ourselves alone, but for one another. While our faith may enable us to bump along pleasantly in good times, it matters most where the rubber meets the road.