

5 Sunday of Lent, B

One of the special features of our modern world is a phenomenon that someone has named it the electronic church. Turn on your radio or television most any hour of any day, and you can hear some self-styled minister preaching his self-styled version of the Christian gospel. Those of us who believe in freedom of speech and freedom of religion must respect their right to do this, even though we may disagree with their message and their methods. So long as they can afford the airtime and remain within the bounds of legal correctness, they have every right to propagate their faith.

But there is one aspect of this electronic gospel that is so widely proclaimed and so badly inaccurate that it almost demands a reply; and that is the suggestion that faith in Christ is the secret to so-called success.

I think it was Benjamin Franklin who created the motto: "Early to bed and early to rise makes one healthy, wealthy, and wise." Well, obviously that's not true. It makes good sense to get sufficient amount of sleep; but the time of day one does that, has nothing to do with the state of one's mind, the size of one's bank account, or the general condition of one's body. So that bit of verse has long since been abandoned as a formula for success. But in

recent years, some spokesmen for the electronic church have revived it, revised it, and adopted it as a slogan for the gospel.

Day after day, they keep telling any who will listen to them, that faith in Christ is the solution to all of life's problems, especially such problems as sick bodies, overdrawn bank accounts, and broken relationships. Then to back up their story they give illustrations or furnish testimonies. You can hear stories from people who were dying of an incurable disease until they trusted Christ; now they are healed. Others will tell how they were out of work until they trusted Christ, now they have a good job and all of the money they need. Others will report how faith in Christ solved their marital problems and made their homes a bit of heaven on earth.

Such an approach to Christian evangelization, I strongly protest. I do not doubt or deny that the problems of life can best be handled and overcome within the context of a firm faith in Christ. I do, however, deny that anyone has the right to promise easy living as an encouragement to Christian discipleship. Jesus never did that. In fact, he did the exact opposite.

In today's Gospel reading he issued this invitation: "If anyone would serve me, let him follow me." Then he explained where he was going: "Once I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself."

In other words, Jesus knew that he was headed for the cross, and he invited any who would to follow him in that experience.

The basis of his appeal to the human race was and still is the cross on which he died. And at first thought, that does not seem very appealing. We would much prefer a less demanding gospel. There is a part of every one of us that longs for a life of ease and comfort. Given a choice, we would prefer a savior who solves all of our problems and makes us healthy and wealthy. But Christ makes no such offer. He reaches for something higher and better in each of us. Through his cross he appeals to the courage of an unconsenting conscience. Christ had that himself, and eventually it cost him his life.

Sometimes we deal with the cross in such a superficial fashion. We think of it and speak of it as if it were a theological stage play, written by God and acted out by Jesus. And the whole thing was planned, prearranged, and divine orchestrated in order that the human race might be forgiven. And it is wonderfully true that we find forgiveness at his cross, but that is not how it all happened. Jesus died because he had an unconsenting conscience and would not make peace with some of the things that were going on around him. For example, when he preached in the synagogue of Nazareth, the audience turned into an angry crowd that wanted to kill him.

How could that happen to a young preacher in his own hometown? It was because he had an unconsenting conscience that compelled him to speak out against racial prejudice and religious intolerance.

Our Gospel reading two Sundays ago told of the day that he cleansed the Temple. With a whip of cords, he drove out the merchants and their sacrificial animals. He overturned the money-changers' tables and scattered the coins to the four-winds. That action, as much as any other, earned him the undying hatred of the establishment. Why did he do it? It was because he had an unconsenting conscience that could not stand to see social injustice propagated in the name of religion.

Jesus had that quality in himself, and he brought it out in all of those he seriously influenced, and he reaches for it in you and me. Deep inside of every one of us are both a hero and a coward. When we are weak, we like for that coward to be understood, explained, justified, and accepted. But there are better days when we long for something or someone to awaken that hero and send us out to face our duties and difficulties with strength and courage. That is the part of us to which Christ makes his appeal - not to overprotect the coward but to awaken the hero.

He also appeals to that something inside of each one of us that longs to be of service. So much of the emphasis in popular religion flows in the opposite direction - put your trust in Christ and look at all of the wonderful things you will get - good health and plenty of money as long as you live and heaven when you die.

Christ never appealed to a single soul on that level. Listen to his words: "If anyone would serve me, let him follow me; where I am, there will my servant be." Allow me to paraphrase that. It seems to me that Jesus is saying: I have got a job to do, and I need help doing it. The only thing I can promise you is long hours, low pay, and a certain sense of satisfaction at the end of the day. Now, if you want to participate, roll up your sleeves, pick up your tools, and let's get started.

That, my friends, is a far cry from the gospel of health and wealth. It might be called the gospel of hard work, but there is something appealing to it. Deep inside, every one of us longs to do something significant and useful with his or her life. We want to be possessed by a cause that is bigger and better than ourselves. We only have one life, what a shame to waste it by playing games and chasing dreams.

Well, Christ makes his appeal to that noble desire that is hidden somewhere in every one of us. He offers us the opportunity to be a part of his cause. The field is big, the workers are few, the hours are long, and the pay is cheap. But if you want to do something useful with your life, jump in and go to work; there is a place for you.

We are talking about the drawing power of the cross of Christ, and we have been protesting an approach to the gospel that offers a life of ease and comfort. Doubtless, to some, such a sermon is not very appealing. It seems so demanding and difficult; surely there must be an easier way. But there is not. His cross is there. It has taken hold of our lives, and we never can completely escape it. But we need to know that in that cross and the things for which it stands lays the most genuine happiness any of us can ever know. To find the courage of an unconsenting conscience, to answer the call of a cause worth serving - that is the right road to the deepest and most durable satisfaction in life.

Jesus said "Once I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself." Lord, we feel the drawing power of your cross; give us the grace to follow it. **Amen.**