

In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches the disciples about the power of evil. He says plainly, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him." Religious movements wanting to capture the attention of a large number of followers, need to have a realistic understanding of evil. No one will last long in a religion glossing over the harsh, brutal facts of human suffering. Dwelling only on those sweet moments when we walk in the garden with our Saviour will soon bring us to having our faith shattered by the intrusions of evil - ours, others, and that of history and nature. Religious positive thinking takes us only so far. We need a sturdier faith present for those moments when the best prayer we can manage is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Playing it safe, the Jesus movement could have opted for being one of the several movements within Judaism, confined to the holy land, and ministering only to Jews. This would not be very costly. In fact, this was the vision of some of the earliest Christians. James, the brother of Jesus, wanted it this way. Strangely, the death of Jesus made the Jesus movement attractive to a larger group than those just in the holy land. Jesus teaches us that a witness to the mercy and compassion of God can cost us our lives.

The early Christians had both a realism about life as well as the glory lying beyond the suffering. For the first Christians belief in the resurrection of Jesus was because they already sensed the resurrection element in all of life. Life rises from death in all sorts of ways. A righteous cause goes down to defeat time after time, until one day it rises to new life. A woman whose husband has been torn away by death, rises up out of her grief, gathers her children around her and finds the will and means to send her children off to university. In a suburb noted for crime and drugs, a few people decide to reclaim it for decent and responsible living. A medical scientist driven to despair trying to discover a better treatment for some dread disease, gives it one more try and finds the cure. A concert pianist, no longer able to play up to his professional standards, finds a rich and rewarding life as a teacher of young piano students who possess the unique talents she once had.

In a sense Jesus' resurrection is no exceptional unusual event. His mission and spirit returned to life, as God continually lifts goodness up out of suffering and defeat. Those who make the resurrection a miraculous "interruption" of the way things are, are missing the point. Jesus' resurrection is not something unique and unusual causing us to marvel and wonder. No, Jesus' resurrection is one - if albeit the greatest - with all the resurrections occurring all the time. We can not only rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus, but we can also glimpse the prevailing resurrecting power of God all around us. The point we made earlier holds more true. Life recognising the evils threatening human and cosmic welfare, opens us up to the glory of resurrection.

When I read about the ambition of the disciples that we hear in our Gospel this morning, I think about the clergy. We say that we want nothing more than to serve the Lord, wherever and under any circumstances; but often beneath such piety is a powerful ambition yearning for the large congregation with the big budget and multiple staff, or the pointy hat and stick. We may try to hide our ambition, but inwardly it haunts us. Ambition dies hard, if ever.

Congregations can be ambitious for themselves, too. Our current church growth movement feeds on the unchallenged idolatry - that success in the church is related to its membership. Even more frightening, the church growth movement says every church can, and should, grow. This blatant lie bedevils many congregations who have little or no opportunity for growth, making priests adopt an

unrealistic standard for successful ministry. This cultural obsession with numbers infects perceptions inside and outside the church. The mental-spiritual health of many churches and priests is damaged because of this capitulation to our cultural ethos equating success with size and largeness.

Occasionally, a church will follow Jesus rather than the dominant church fad, and what marks those churches are not numbers of bums on pews or money in the coffers, but faithfulness in worship, prayer, the scriptures, sacraments and love of neighbour.

Our Gospel is very honest, allowing us to see our individual struggles in all of this. Mark says they were hustling along to Capernaum, and when they got there, Jesus asked them what they had been arguing about on the way. When Jesus asked them about their conversation they became silent. What do we make of this? Perhaps it's because the disciples know that their conversation was off-limits for Jesus followers. They were embarrassed by Jesus' query and they say nothing. I wonder if we would be so humble or quiet? or would we tell Jesus what we were talking about and how right we were?

Jesus continues to tell the disciples, what they must have heard from him more than once, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Nietzsche remarked that Jesus' ethic was a slave ethic. Some think that this is a devastating judgment against Jesus, particularly in our world where power and firepower are so honoured. Perhaps it's time for us to say two things about Nietzsche's comment: One, Jesus would say that Nietzsche had it right; and two, that when all the other self-serving ethics have come and gone, we can believe that Jesus' "slave ethic" will prevail. Greatness in God's kingdom is a kingdom where greatness is service.

Now we tend to be squeamish about spiritual rewards for our faithfulness, but the issue about rewards really is, what sort of reward do we want? Do we want all the trinkets, toys, and perks the world offers? How unabashedly crass have we become? These things are much desired in our day, but the church cannot have any part in helping their congregations toward those goals.

The rewards that come to those who have understood that greatness is service, are rewarded with the blessings of "the one who sent" Jesus. When we minister to children, we are in line for this reward. Notice that "children" is not exclusively those younger in years. In Jesus' vocabulary, children are those most vulnerable and most helpless. They are those most forgotten, and quite unromantically, those who are often disagreeable, ungracious, manipulative, and sometimes dangerous. Caring for them often means painful caring.

Sometimes we wonder about those missionaries who go off to far and forsaken places to witness to the gospel. They take medical care with them, they educate those without schooling, they help those to whom they minister to develop leadership skills, and they speak of the religious convictions bringing them to such places. These missionaries are remarkable for their sense of joy and courage. When we hear them tell about their work, we wonder how they could manage such optimism, steadfastness and faithfulness. We also notice they are willing to return to their ministries in difficult places after their break. No one forces them to return to their work after a brief respite. They just go. How is this possible? Is it because there is an inner reward that is worth more than all the worldly rewards they might capture? Do we have to linger very long over such a question as this? Perhaps it is already given in today's Gospel, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Fr Robert