

September 16, 2012 – 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Prepared by Fr. Joseph Towle, MM

Isaiah 50:5-9a; Psalm 116:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9; James 2:14-18; Mark 8: 27-35

The threat of violence is present in two of today's three readings. In the first reading, Isaiah expresses his total commitment and faithfulness to God's call even when it brings violence upon him. His enemies beat him; they pulled his beard, and spit in his face. He concludes that to be a faithful follower of God (or a true prophet, in his case) will necessarily provoke strong negative reaction from some listeners and a strong defense from "God, my help."

The first and third readings often are chosen for sharing similar themes. Mark's gospel reading describes Jesus teaching that He has to suffer greatly at the hands of the religious authorities, who will succeed in killing him. Peter, who just confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Anointed One, hears this with disbelief and, taking Jesus aside, rebukes Him. Jesus then gives Peter as severe a dressing down as appears in the gospels, calling him a "Satan."

Indeed violence is insinuated from the first chapter of Mark, when Jesus entered the synagogue and "taught with authority, and not as the scribes." The striking commentary of the people had to have been overheard by the scribes; it had to have hurt and it certainly would not be forgotten. The remaining chapters recount with growing loudness the animosity of the religious authorities toward Jesus.

Isaiah and Jesus, both prophets and both subject to rejection and violence.

Once in my parish in San Pedro Necta in the mountains of northwestern Guatemala, I gave a homily on the feast of Good Shepherd Sunday. It was a time when the rural farmers were burning their fields. Some fires got out of control and spread to the mountainsides where they burned day and night for weeks, raining ashes and smoke on the town. I spoke about a good shepherd caring for the fields and preventing the unchecked fires, while the bad shepherd sat on the sidelines and did nothing. The same night someone put a torch to the parish's agricultural plot, possibly the town's mayor who took my words as directed against him.

Jesus insists in today's gospel reading that those who want to follow Him, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross ... For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake ... will save it." These are indeed mysterious words and cause deep reflection. It seems that our first instinct is to fight to preserve our life, to defend ourselves from whatever, from whoever threatens to take it away. Who wouldn't fight someone who wanted to kill us or our loved ones? Then what does it mean to lose our lives for Jesus' sake? Yet His life and that of many of his followers give us this example.

Later, when I worked with Maryknoll's video production department, I was engaged in a long-term series called "Children of the Earth." It involved traveling to different countries in

Asia, Africa and the Americas to film the lives and activities of teenagers. It took many years to film and to edit all 16 portraits, but I loved the work, for it brought me into very close friendship with many families and cultures from around the world.

One video segment features a 13-year old Mayan girl, Guadalupe (Lupita) Vazquez, from the village of Acteal in Chiapas, Mexico. Fifteen years ago, this village was the scene of a massacre of 45 people and became international news. The entire village had pledged to peacemaking in the struggle between government troops and the resistance group, the Zapatistas. Unfortunately, that effort wasn't appreciated. On December 22, 1997 while the group was in the chapel praying, neighboring Mayans, linked to the government military, entered the village and began firing their weapons into the chapel. In the ensuing chaos Lupita's mother and father and five sisters were murdered; two siblings were shot in the legs. Lupita escaped injury by running "faster than the bullets."

Lupita and other Latin American victims of violence that is too often government sponsored are the people I bring with me to the gates of Ft. Benning, Georgia in protest against the training of Latin American military at the United States School of the Americas (Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation). I hold it as a badge of honor that I was one of 600 people arrested and processed there in 1995. Maybe in a small measure, this is what Jesus meant by "losing one's life."

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns: Peace, social justice and integrity of creation
200 New York Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001
(202)832-1780 ogc@maryknoll.org www.maryknollogc.org