

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 17, 2009

Everyone who is in a helping profession wants to make a difference in people's lives. The reward of hard work and dedication comes when someone acknowledges that what was done for him or her has really made a difference. When students remember a lesson that they learned from a teacher, or a parishioner quotes a homily that strengthened his faith, the teacher or preacher is renewed by the sense that his or her efforts made someone else's life a bit better. We all have those memories of people who have done great things for us, whose lives and work and examples have made a difference. Some did more than others and there are always a few who went the extra mile to be certain that we were successful, supported, confident and ready to face the world.

Our present is founded on significant moments of the past. We never know which event will change our life until we look back. But we can live each day, fully aware that each moment is full of potential and hope. No matter how ordinary, routine, or mundane things may seem, every single one carries a promise that this moment will be the cornerstone of our future.

Jesus and the apostles experienced similar moments together. As teacher and preacher, Jesus formed the Twelve into apostles through his words and deeds. They saw his miracles, heard his words, and felt his compassion and love. They watched and experienced the Word made flesh live as God intended. Jesus was the

living Gospel who transformed them through small words and gestures, each one revealing God's power and love. Many times they would not understand, but Jesus would explain to them the ways of the Kingdom.

So after all they had seen and heard, there came a moment of truth, the moment when they had to summarize what they believed, what they felt, and what they understood. It came down to one question that Jesus asked: who do you say that I am? This is more than just a theological question. It is the question of faith because the answer shapes the purpose and meaning of our life. It is easy to offer an academic response like Jesus is the Second Person of the Trinity. But an answer like Peter's is explosive and to the point: You are the Messiah! Peter's answer changes the course of his life forever.

Each of us must also answer that same question. Many of us would say that we have faith. We know what we believe and are confident in it. No doubt, that is very true and we are certain in what we believe and practice as followers of Jesus. But there is something more that we need. The dynamic power of faith is only seen when we have a sense of mission, a sense of being apostles—those who are sent—who proclaim the good news. Too often, church communities fall into a certain apathy, growing comfortable with the way things are. Complacency is the medium within which evil works best. When we lose our sense of mission, we lose the energy and the will to stand firm against evil wherever and however it may

show itself. We accept things as being the way they are and people end up hungry, homeless, jobless and robbed of their dignity. Social evils masked in the cloak of progress are tolerated and bit by bit, human life is downgraded like cheap stock in a bad market.

On the other hand, vigilance, enthusiasm, determination and perseverance, the hallmarks of zeal and mission, all hinder evil. Our call to arms sensitizes others to human suffering and need. We no longer stand by and wait, hoping that someone else steps in. We become the prophet, the teacher, the one who proclaims the grace and salvation that come from God. As the Letter of James reminds us, our faith needs to act so that our actions grow in faith! If we really believe that Jesus is the Messiah, then we are with him, acting in his place, seeing others as members of the family of God.

Just last week, the world marked a milestone, the 70th anniversary of the Nazi invasion of Poland, on September 1, 1939—the event that finally ignited the bonfire that became World War II.

The British press, while noting this piece of history, also took note of something else: the legacy of a remarkable humanitarian, Nicholas Winton, a 29-year-old Christian who rescued hundreds of Jewish children and became known as the “British Schindler.”

As reported in the London Telegraph: He was packing to go skiing just before Christmas in 1938 when he received a call from a friend working in a refugee camp in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia. “Cancel your holiday,” said the friend, Martin Blake. “I need you in Prague. Don’t bring your skis.”

The young banker was so moved by what he saw that he immediately set about persuading the British authorities to let in refugee children. The response was sluggish, but after much work by Winton, who was a Christian with Jewish roots, the paperwork for each child was painstakingly put in order.

Finally the wheels began to move. Between March and August 1939 eight trains carried 669 children to Britain, who otherwise would probably have perished in the death camps. Fifteen thousand Czechoslovakian children died in the war.

After the war, Winton kept his work secret—his wife didn’t even know what he had done for 40 years, until he was knighted. Earlier this month, the 100-year-old Sir Nicholas had a poignant reunion with some of the children he had rescued—children who are now grandparents, and who will never forget the man who saved their lives.

Reading about the work of Nicholas Winton and others like him, we can’t help but wonder: what would I have done?

Indeed, confronting the injustices and atrocities of our own age—from abortion to torture to poverty—leaves me wondering how many of us are willing to put our faith in action, to stand firm for what we know is right?

James cautions us that: “Faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead”. In the gospel, Jesus teaches his followers that part of that work involves taking up the cross—dying to ourselves for the sake of others.

This weekend may be a good time for us to prayerfully take the pulse of our own faith. How strong is it? What are we doing to keep it alive?

Or put more simply: what are we *doing*?

Because, as the story of Nicholas Winton reminds us, it is in the *doing*—in making the sacrifice, and helping others to carry *their* crosses—that we truly give life to our faith...and give that life to others.