

August 31– 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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- Jeremiah 20:7-9 Jeremiah is unpopular for denouncing sin and unfaithfulness and announcing a renewed covenant, yet his passion for justice forces him to continue.
- Psalms 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 8-9 The psalmist yearns and thirsts for God like parched, lifeless land without water.
- Romans 12:1-2 “Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”
- Matthew 16:21-27 Peter’s limited worldview is revealed as Jesus talks of persecution, suffering and self-denial which come with being his follower.

In the large city of Cochabamba in the heart of Bolivia - the second poorest country in the hemisphere, one of two in South America with no outlet to the sea, and the one with the highest population of indigenous people – my commitment is to aid and mentor new missionaries arriving in Latin America for the first time for study at the Maryknoll Language Institute. More importantly, I enjoy the privilege of accompanying them in the process of intercultural communication where they discover the wisdom of a new culture in dialogue with their own culture of origin. They come from several continents, a composite of a globalized intercultural reality and are a reflection of the changing face of mission today, namely from the global South to their brothers and sisters in the global South.

In the orientation talks and lectures that my colleagues and I present, we always note the fact that the “grafitti” painted on the walls of the city of Cochabamba not only repeats the political slogans of whatever campaign or protest that is presently going on, but often serves as the “bulletin board” of the poor and the disenfranchised who have no way to voice their concerns and make claims for human dignity, conveying a deeper message of the state of mind of the people. Unlike other places where “grafitti” expresses the anguish of not being heard, these sayings are not a desperate unintelligible cry for recognition. Rather they reveal the popular wisdom of the common people.

Recently one such saying caught my attention because it both surprised and baffled me. In bold letters it proclaimed: “Enough of realities, we want promises!” My first reaction was to think of this as a cynical remark. Why ignore the sad reality of a country whose people are mired in poverty, racism and underdevelopment? To speak of promises, in the face of so much obvious inequality, smacks of arrogance. Yet, as time has gone on, I began to perceive the wisdom behind this saying that reverses the usual language of “political correctness” to send another kind of message that is far more profound.

On the one hand, people in a place like Bolivia or any number of other places in the world today do not need to be reminded of reality. They face it front and square every waking moment. But, what is often overlooked are the ways they overcome adversity in creatively looking for a better life and conditions. Their struggle to make that happen can be seen in the response to natural disasters or political conflict and in large and small ways in creating alternatives. Thus, empty and unfulfilled promises that one usually associated with politics do not apply here. Through their protests and organized social movements, people are looking toward the promise of a better tomorrow. In the words of the World Social Forums held around the developing world in recent years, the theme of “another world is possible” has become a mantra and a rallying cry for social transformation that runs counter to conventional wisdom.

The recent primary political campaigns in the U.S. that captured so much attention and turned out record numbers of crowds to hear the campaign promises of the different candidates could be approached with the same kind of cynicism. However, there is something different in the air than business as usual. Indifference has been replaced by a longing for a message of hope and change along with a growing awareness of a shared responsibility that goes beyond the mere formal exercise of voting in an election every four years. Participative democracy, if one reads the “signs of the times” correctly, has made a small but meaningful comeback.

Although I have been out of the U.S. during most of the past five months I was able to witness first hand a distinct difference in the primary campaigns viewed from my own home state of Montana. “The last best place” as we call ourselves became the “last place” to hold a primary election in June. Never before in memory had so much attention been focused on our state. With only a handful of delegates at stake, candidates frenetically crisscrossed the state visiting remote areas, Native American reservations, small towns and the few large cities of a state with less than a million people, in pursuit of votes. In so many ways, I sensed that people from all walks of life and social classes, small farmers, workers and professional people alike wanted more than the usual sound bytes, simplistic solutions and slogans. By their engaged presence and the presence of the candidates they seemed to say that we need solid promises on which to build a future. Moreover, they are willing to work with the candidates to achieve the common good and to live in solidarity in a globalized reality that offers no easy answers to problems whose solutions unite us more than divide us in looking for ways to live together in a more interdependent fashion.

When we turn to today’s Gospel reading we see Jesus on a campaign trail of a different sort, but one that guides and forms the disciples in an apprenticeship to be his followers, to break with the existing models and to think “outside the box” in searching for alternatives with only the assurance of a promise of “losing one’s life in order to gain it.” Last week’s Gospel reading asks the pivotal question: “who do people say that I am?” From there Jesus probes the disciples further to check out their motivations, especially Peter who never seems to get it right. Not surprisingly, Peter is all of us! Jesus becomes like the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah in today’s first reading, who denounces situations of sin and unfaithfulness, but announces the dawning of a new day of a renewal of the covenant with his people despite all of the impending signs of destruction and impending doom. In Jeremiah customarily the prophet of doom, come words of passion to express his pursuit of the truth.

We continue to witness the dialogue between Jesus and the disciples today and perceive Jesus’ frustration and anger with Peter’s thick-headed stubbornness to follow the old mindset. Jesus then delivers the punch line with the promise of persecution, suffering and the self-denial needed to take up one’s cross. What a letdown in Peter’s limited worldview! Yet, this promise was so mysteriously compelling that he and the rest followed Jesus to his fateful destiny in Jerusalem with nothing more than this assurance. Later St. Paul picks up on the theme by stressing the doing of God’s will as the most important motivating force in lives of discipleship. Without a clear road map they journeyed on doubting the end result, but pressing forward just the same toward Jerusalem. On this seemingly vague promise they and we are led to get our heads and hearts in the right place to make the promises an ever present reality of fulfillment.

The questions we face today as disciples of Jesus as well as U.S. Americans and planetary citizens facing a decisive moment in our national life are ones where sacrifice and self-denial are necessary to achieve the common good in solidarity with all of humankind. Solutions to issues and concerns like global warming and climate change, immigration and welcoming the stranger, national security and peace, ethnic conflict to name just a few cannot be found in the usual way in terms of insufficient limited technical solutions or by the use of criteria where people don’t matter. As committed Christians and disciples of the living Christ we are called to break the mold and collaborate in fashioning a new planet shaped in the image and likeness of the Creator God. This

begins in announcing the promise by our witness to the whole range of global and life issues in the public square and by entering into the current debates not with a religious agenda but from the bedrock of faith based initiatives of justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

Then at the end of the day, we can say that the overwhelming realities we face are nothing in comparison with the promise of God's reign breaking into our world in small but significant ways in the renewal of our hearts and minds to do the "reasonable service" that St. Paul called Christians to render in his Letter to the Romans proclaimed in today's second reading. Might this "reasonable service" reflect the upsurge in public and private service commitments as current trends indicate away from the pervasive materialism and crass consumerism of these past decades?

This Labor Day weekend, the traditional start of the campaign for the White House, gives us pause in our reflections to ponder alternative ways of thinking and acting as citizens called and formed as disciples to cast our lot not with empty promises without sacrifice but with those promises that will require something more of each of us and our communities to lose our lives in finding the "pearl of great price." Yes, indeed my friends, promises will win the day and reality as we know it is not the final word.

For more information:

As disciples of the living Christ we are indeed called to fashion a new earth shaped in the image and likeness of God's kingdom. But it requires new ways of thinking and for us to be demanding more from those in political leadership. Read more about alternatives to current U.S. policies in "Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world," a resource developed by Maryknoll missionaries who witness the global impact of U.S. political and economic decisions. Through this resource, Maryknoll missionaries encourage voters in the 2008 elections to scrutinize candidates' policy proposals through the lens of those who, both in the U.S. and overseas, lack basic necessities, endure the source of racism, live with gender-based discrimination or feel the immediate impact of climate change.

Email for a copy, or find the election guide here:
www.maryknollogc.org/2008elections/index.htm

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