

5TH Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday, Feb. 8th

The Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John all begin, in one way or another, with stories related to the birth of Jesus. But Mark doesn't tell us anything about Jesus' birth. In fact, he begins his story when Jesus was 30 years old.

So what does Mark have in mind? Obviously, we can't read the author's mind, but one gets the feeling that Mark can't wait to get into the story of what Jesus was DOING. The Gospel of Mark is very much an action gospel. It's as if Mark were saying, "The world needed Jesus"

So in the ordinariness of our lives, all of us struggle and I believe we struggle in three ways. First, sometimes we struggle simply to maintain ourselves, to stay healthy and stable, to not fall apart, to not have our lives unravel into chaos and depression. It takes real effort just to maintain our ordinary health, stability, and happiness.

But, even as this is going on, secondly, another part of us is forever reaching upwards, struggling to grow, to achieve higher things, to live a life that is more admirable, noble, and altruistic.

Then, thirdly, at another level, we struggle with a threatening darkness that surrounds us. The complexities of life can overwhelm us, leaving us feeling threatened, excluded, and insignificant. For this reason, a part of us is forever conscious that we stand one breakdown, one lost relationship, one lost job, one death of a loved one bringing us away from descent into paralyzing depression, an illness, or a dark chaos that we cannot control.

In short, we struggle to maintain ourselves, struggle to grow, and struggle to keep depression and death at bay. Because we struggle at these three levels, we need, therefore, three kinds of spiritualities in our lives.

At one level, we need a spirituality of maintenance, that is, a spirituality that helps us to maintain our health, stability, and ordinariness. Too often spiritual teachings neglect this vital

aspect of spirituality. Rather we are forever being challenged to grow, to be better Christians, to simply be better than we are at present. That's good, but naively takes for granted that we are already healthy, stable, and strong enough to be challenged. And, as we know, many times this isn't the case. There are times in our lives, when the best we can do is to hang on, not fall apart, and fight to regain again some health, stability, and strength in our lives, to simply get one foot in front of the next. At these times in our lives, challenge isn't exactly what we need, rather we need to be given permission to feel what we're feeling and we need to be given a warm hand to help draw us back towards health and strength. The challenge to grow comes later.

And that challenge comes with an invitation that invites us upwards, towards a spirituality of the ascent, our second spirituality. All spiritualities worthy of the name, stress the need to make a certain ascent, to grow beyond our immaturities, our laziness, our wounds, and the perennial shallowness of our culture. The emphasis here is always to reach upward and towards all that is more noble, altruistic, compassionate, loving, and saintly. Much of classical Christian spirituality is a spirituality of the ascent, an

invitation to something higher, an invitation to be true to what is deepest inside of us, namely, the Image and Likeness of God. Much of Jesus' preaching invites us precisely to something higher. Confucius, one of the great moral teachers of all time, had a similar pedagogy, inviting people to look to beauty and goodness and to forever reach in that direction. In our own time, John Paul II used this very effectively in his appeal to young people, challenging them always to not settle for compromise or second-best, but to look always for something higher and more noble to give their lives to.

But the challenge to growth also needs a spirituality of descent, our third spirituality, that is, a vision and a set of disciplines that point us not just towards the rising sun, but also towards the setting sun. We need a spirituality that doesn't avoid or deny the complexities of life, the paralyzing losses and depressions in life, and the looming reality of sickness, diminishment, and death. Sometimes we can only grow by descending into that frightening underworld, where, like Jesus, we undergo a transformation by facing chaos, darkness, satanic forces (whatever these may be), and death itself. In some ancient cultures this was called "sitting

in the ashes” or “being a child of Saturn” (the archetypal planet of depression). As Christians, we call this undergoing the paschal mystery. Whatever the name, all spiritualities will, at some time in our life, invite us to make a painful descent into the frightening underworld of chaos, depression, loss, darkness, and death itself.

Life reveals itself above us and below us and on the flat plain of ordinariness. None of these may be ignored. And so we need always to maintain and steady ourselves, even as we reach upwards and sometimes allow ourselves to descend into darkness.

And there’s still time to do all this. As Rainer Marie Rilke once wrote:

You are not dead yet. It is not too late
To open your depths by plunging into them
And drink in the life
That reveals itself quietly there.

So yes, this is a holy reminder, with Lent some 10 days away. You and I – we who call ourselves Christians and who

want so much to be worthy of that name – we're the ones who represent Jesus in a world that needs him altogether as much as it did 20 centuries ago, when he came physically to be among us. This is surely what Mark wants us to know.

Because our world is still in need, it still needs the Christ of Cavalry, with his compassion for our human need. And now, you and I are part of that team. We are called to help in the healing of our world.