

14 Sunday Ordinary Time C 2004

July 2-3

Frazee/Callaway

Many people like to use marks of the Christian faith. There is the “Jesus fish” that can be seen affixed to the back of cars. Some people wear crosses or crucifixes. I have followed my mother’s practice and have a crucifix on my key chain. In his letter to the Galatians St. Paul says that he “...bears the marks of Jesus on my body.” I want to break open this image in its scriptural context.

In Galatia there were “some agitators” (1:17) who called into question St. Paul’s authority as an apostle (1:1,12) apparently on the grounds that his commission did not come from Christ. Further they claimed that he was not preaching the true gospel; that he had watered it down for the sake of the gentile converts. St. Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians to defend his position as an apostle, to defend the faith, and to distinguish it from Mosaic practices. It is in this context that St. Paul teaches about justification by grace through faith apart from deeds prescribed by the law.

In defending himself personally, St. Paul refers to his *stigmata*. *Stigmata* is a Greek word referring to the branding used by the owner to mark his slave, like a rancher brands his cattle for identification. Most likely what Paul means when he refers to “the marks of Jesus on his body” is the scars of beatings he suffered for Christ. The beatings, whipped and stoned, would have left substantial scars on his body. These scars were the brand, the mark, which showed him to be Christ's slave. It is as if Christ himself had branded St. Paul, claimed him as his own. Like a master owns a slave, St. Paul claimed to be owned by Christ; not just his heart and his soul, but his “body too.” What marks do we bare on our bodies that identify us as claimed by Christ?

In the Sacrament of Baptism the child is claimed by Christ by tracing the sign of the cross on his forehead. This cross is an invisible brand; the first *stigmata* of the Christian. The Church also speaks of being “signed” in the name of the Blessed Trinity (RCIA #5): The water that flowed over our heads and the words themselves, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” the water and the words, are etched onto our souls.

Today’s gospel offers us a glimpse at other signs that Christians bare on our bodies and in our actions. Jesus instructed the seventy-two, “Carry no money bag, no sack, no sandal...” The Christian is not to be cluttered up with material things; we are to travel light. It is easy to get entangled in the things of this life.

There was a wealthy man reaching the twilight years. When looking at his mansion, his power and his politics, he remarked smugly, "These are the things which make it difficult to die." The things of earth must never obscure our vision of heaven.

Jesus seems to have known something about the human spirit when he sent the seventy-two on mission. He sent them into the world unencumbered. Simplicity of life is to be a sign of our commitment to Christ.

Jesus said to his disciples, "...into whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house...'" Our peace is built upon prayer and the Eucharist. It is built upon a personal relationship with Jesus—to have known and experienced his love. Our peace is founded on the knowledge that no matter how angry the world gets, God will have the last word. When that word is spoken, the peacemakers will inherit the earth.

Will your commitment to peace change the world? I don't know. Can one peaceful Christian change a family, a parish, a community? Absolutely! If Christ is at the center of all we think and pray and do, then...Peace is before us, peace is behind us, peace is under our feet. Peace is a sign of Christian people.

St. Paul bore the marks of Jesus on his body. We bare the stigmata, too. The sign of the cross is on your forehead now. Simplicity and peace are the marks that Christ asked his disciples to take upon themselves.