

LENT SECOND SUNDAY YEAR B 2009 HOMILY

(Genesis 22: 1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18; Romans 8: 31b-34; Mark 9:2-10)

CHRIST OUR HOPE

I'm not sure why I read the article in the Dispatch. I am not even that interested in cycling. But I am interested in stories of hope and redemption. Thus a week ago yesterday I found myself reading the fascinating story of Chad Gerlach.

Chad Gerlach was a promising cyclist from a young age who at 17 had raced the great Lance Armstrong and seemed destined to be his rival. But then something went very wrong. Chad was always bordering on troubled and he was his own worst enemy. By 2003 he had become seriously addicted to crack and began a five-year stint living on the streets in Sacramento. He had to beg help from friends and strangers, sleeping under overpasses and in abandoned buildings. He was stabbed twice and hobbled around for a time on a broken ankle that he had no way of getting medical help for.

But Chad Gerlach was lucky – or I should say blessed – because he had a friend, a guy named Vito Accettura. Vito called the A & E cable TV program “Intervention” which did a show on Chad. Because of this experience, Gerlach agreed to treatment and now, just a year and a half later, he is back in cycling and is again spoken of as a possible serious rival of Armstrong.

I found it amusing and heartwarming that Chad signed a contract with a team called Amore and Vita (which means “love and life” in Italian), jointly sponsored by the Vatican and McDonald's. This interesting team tries to include one recovering addict as a gesture of goodwill and a sign of hope. It is heartwarming because our church at the highest level is giving us an example of what it means to be compassionate and what it means never to give up on someone. It is wonderful that the Vatican has its hands in doing so much good. It is amusing because I kept thinking of some of the advertising McDonald's could do with a church theme. How about an even bigger Big Mac called “Cardinal Mac” or perhaps “Big Ben?” Or really biggie fries called “Archbishop Fries” – or just “Arch Fries” for short? Or maybe something like a “Vatican shake?”

As I said, Amore and Vita is a team that wants to show goodwill and to engender hope. Hope is a large part of the Christian message and of the Lenten message – hope for forgiveness, hope for salvation and eternal life. Christ came to give hope to the human race. This was not an easy vocation because it ultimately entailed suffering and death. But the Resurrection nailed down hope as something all followers of Christ could cling to. This is probably why Jesus was transfigured in today's gospel up on the mountain in the presence of his inner circle of disciples, Peter, James, and John. The Transfiguration showed Jesus in his glorious state, the same change that would happen to him when he rose from the dead. This experience on the mountain was also a preview of the final establishment of God's kingdom at the end of time when all who follow Christ will rise in glory with him.

But before this time of glory, Jesus and all his disciples must faithfully do God's will. This necessarily involves sacrifice – it means the experience of the cross. Just before the Transfiguration, Jesus predicts

his Passion to his disciples for the first time. They are shaken by this, even though Christ also tells them that he will rise again from the dead. The Transfiguration is a glimpse of what Jesus means by rising again. It gives his closest followers hope.

But hope is not easily or cheaply attained. What Jesus predicted about himself happened – he suffered, died, and was buried. And his followers correctly have the inkling that what happens to the Rabbi and Master will also happen to them. They too, as Jesus kept telling them, would have to endure the cross. But their sacrifice would help to bring hope to the world too.

Chad Gerlach's friend, Vito Accettura, gave hope to his buddy. It was not an easy thing to do. It required sticking by his friend even though Chad may not have deserved such generosity. It required a dogged determination that a fellow human being was not going to be wasted and destroyed. It required selfless love. Vito's friendship is the kind we all want and the kind we all want to give. This kind of friendship tests the limits of faith; that is, it tests the limits of trust in God and in humanity. This kind of friendship reminds us that hope is (as someone has said) faith put in the future tense. Hope paradoxically is the fruit of the cross which is the greatest act of love in human history and which is our greatest challenge as imitators of Christ.

Who knows what lies ahead for Chad Gerlach. I will be following his story because I am hooked on it. It is a story that we all like because it has a chance of turning out really well. But Chad Gerlach has a new life only because his family and friends never gave up on him. This is also the story of the human race. Where would we be if God had given up on us? Where would we be if God had not chosen to offer his beloved Son in sacrifice for us? Just as Abraham trusted God in the first reading, so Jesus trusted his Father that his obedience would not be for nothing. Where would we be if God had turned against us and abandoned us to our sins instead of sending his son (as the second reading reminds us) to show that God is for us and not against us? Where would each of us be if we didn't care for one another after the example of God and his Christ?

We are living in difficult and trying times. Like Christ and like the Vito's of this world, we are called more than ever to make the sacrifices to give hope to our community. The Transfigured Christ is our hope for all time – and we are the best hope for someone at any given time. For whom can we be hope at this time of history? For whom can we be hope this week?