

**Homily for February 6, 2000  
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**By Father Charles Bowes**

**Job 7:1-4, 6-7  
1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23  
Mark 1:29-39**

## *Just getting by is just not our style.*

“Is not our life on earth a drudgery?” asks Job in chapter 7 of his book. We do not have to feel the drudgery and anguish of Job to sense that sometimes our lives are without point or passion.

While disaster and depression might be rare for most of us, ennui and a lack of focus are not. And they are enough to bring us low. The causes can be many, yet often enough it is just simply a “managerial” attitude toward our lives, our “maintenance” frame of mind, that makes our feelings and faith go flat. We seriously misunderstand our faith if we see it in terms of getting by and getting through. If that is what it is all about, it has to become a frightful bore.

Perhaps at times our young people catch this. Some sense tedium, a staleness about our religion and our practices. “Mass is so boring,” a young woman recently told me. Well, surely, she’s not going to find much entertainment there – especially if you compare it to our 50 available channels and the razzmatazz of pop culture. Besides, why would one expect novelty and slickness from a sacred communal practice, the hallmarks of which are great tradition, universality and stability of form? Besides, the Mass is a communal

act of which no one is to be a spectator but all produce and receive the effect by working together.

But I think also my young friend is on to something. There is not much intensity or urgency in a community whose primary concerns are managing its relationship to God and maintaining its own existence. Is the Church really about the powerful message of Christ, or is it concerned just with itself...keeping the bills paid, the lights on?

St. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians chapter 9, seems positively driven to write and speak of Jesus and his revelation. “I am under compulsion and have no choice. I am ruined if I do not preach it!” So much does his faith mean to him that he is willing to be the slave of all, to be all things to all people, in order to win them over. For Paul, the faith is definitely not a matter of small consequence.

We, in contrast, may at times be hounded by doubts. Is it really that big of a deal that people believe in Jesus? Does it matter very much to us if our children drift away from a faith we say we love? Isn’t one religion just as good as another? And don’t theologians themselves suggest that conversions, missions and proselytisms are passé, if not wrongheaded?

Well, if our faith is something that really does not make a very big difference, if it is actually not crucial

that we or others believe, no wonder it seems boring to some of our young or to anyone. Anything we don't care much about can't be very interesting.

The things we do care about, however, we inevitably talk about. As another, very wise person put it: "If you love someone or something deeply enough, you want to tell others, you want to share it with others, you think they are missing something if they do not have it."

St. Paul's drivenness is as understandable as the lover's. Both turn almost desperately to declamation, poetry, or song. If faith is real, it seeks expression. It will communicate and profess. It will have the energy of the passion.

But faith cannot be real for us if it is not allowed into our real world. A Christ that is squeezed into a pew may feel cozy, but the relationship will soon tire and confine. Could this be one of the reasons why the gospel of St. Mark at the outset portrays our encounters with Christ over a broad range of life experiences? He heals Peter's mother-in-law, he heals lots of other folks, he goes away to be alone, and then he returns to be with people again.

"The fever left Simon's mother-in-law and she waited on them," says Mark chapter 1. Freed from her affliction, the restored woman at once shows the role of service. Simon's mother-in-law exchanged subjection to illness for grateful attendance on those who came to liberate her.

Those who work in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults see this phenomenon a lot. On the heels of arriving into the Church at Easter, there's often some neophyte who wants to go headlong into service and religious life. This urgency to become a "super Catholic"

intrigued me until I came to appreciate what a great gift membership in the community of faith can be for those who didn't receive it as a birthright like I did. Finding themselves at last among the free children of God, experiencing healing and wholeness perhaps for the first time in their lives, the impulse to get up and serve is pretty powerful. Newly initiated and newly returned Catholics by and large didn't come all this way to be pew sitters. They come to serve and to share their faith. What would our Church be like if this motivation was universally operative? It highlights God's promise to bring good out of every evil and proposes that those who struggle may reap spectacular grace that doesn't come to the complacent. Those who yearn for salvation and know its deprivation more keenly appreciate its reception. Easter comes only after Good Friday, and Pentecost after much fear and prayer. Those who receive miraculous cures as recorded in the gospels were those who ran after Jesus in the streets, breaking laws (like those governing the Sabbath and uncleanness), defying gravity (the man lowered from the roof), or whatever it took to get their heart's desire. Grace isn't a given; it's a gift. We have to put out our hands to take it. After all, the human way of giving to God is to receive. ...just like we do at communion – open hands, open mouths invite the invasion of God.

The late German theologian Carl Rahner once observed: "The Christian of tomorrow will either be a 'mystic' – who has experienced something – or will not exist."

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