

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

August 12, 2012

There's a t-shirt shop by where I live. One t-shirt reads: "Life's a bitch and then you die!" It's symbolic, I think, of a cynical attitude in today's society. What about it? Is it true? Is life a bitch, and then you die? What do you think?

Elijah under the broom tree might be wearing that same t-shirt and crying out, "This is enough, O Lord! Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." When Elijah prayed this prayer, he was definitely depressed. He was being thrown out of town by the pagan Queen Jezebel for preaching against her false prophets. But even holy people, even prophets, get depressed from time to time. This day, under the broom tree, was one of those days, when life for the prophet was "a bitch."

If we are honest, we have to admit that there are times when everything that can go wrong, does. There are times when, despite our faith, despite our good will and sunny dispositions, things simply get fouled up. The wallpaper job looks hopeless. Your first young love moves away, or, worse, moves to someone else. The job promotion that was rightfully due to come your way goes to someone less qualified. The vacation that you had been planning for all year turns out to be a dud. Yes, in all honesty, we have to admit that there are times when life truly is "a bitch."

And, of course, the second line of the saying is true as well: "Then you die." Even the people who ate manna in the desert died. And despite all our fresh fruit and vegetables, and aerobics and our marvelous medical advances, there will come a day, you can bet on it, when a doctor will hold the hand of one of your loved ones and say, "I'm sorry; we did the best we could."

You've heard the story of the husband who looked at his wife and declared: "You know, we have to face it, my dear, one of these days, one of us is going to die before the other. And I just wanted you to know that, when that happens, I plan to move to a better climate." Even though we hate to admit it and think that only *other* people die, it is true what the t-shirt proclaims, "And then you die."

But lest you think that I have succumbed to the cynicism of today, let me tell you there is room for at least two other sentences on the t-shirt. Sometimes, life is “a bitch,” but also it could have read that “life is a blessing.” If we concentrate only on the spilled paint cans, the lost loves, the lost ball games, we miss one of the central teachings of our Christian faith: Life is a blessing, a free gift from God. If we have the guts not to hide our depression, but to seek help and cry out to God even when we are *not* having a nice day, then God will be there for us with food and drink and hope for our journey.

You know the story of the twelve year old Jacob Finkbonner from Lummi who fought successfully with the help of doctors and the intercession of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha to overcome some kind of flesh-eating disease. A reporter asked his mother if the boy’s attitude on life had changed since his recovery. She responded by telling how recently the boy and his best friend had just been defeated by their rivals in a basketball game. On the way home, his friend kept pouting about the loss. Jake simply said, “Why are you so down?” We’re not bleeding, are we? We’re not in pain.” The boy had learned, through pain, that life, indeed, is a blessing.

There is room for one more sentence on that t-shirt: “Then you rise.” Jesus was bold enough to say that to the murmuring crowds: “Let me firmly assure you, the one who believes has eternal life. This is the bread come down from heaven, for one to eat and never die. If anyone eats this bread, that one shall live forever.” For Christians, the resurrection is more than something that happened over two thousand years ago. It happens each time we allow God, as Jesus did, to destroy the evil and depression that rob us of life, and to begin again.

So, the next time I look at that t-shirt in the window that reads, “Life’s a bitch and then you die,” I will be more compassionate and try to understand that not everyone is having a nice day. And I’ll whisper a short prayer for the depressed in our world, that they too may also come to believe that “Life’s a blessing, and then we rise!”

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