

Homily for September 13, 2009 (24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, B)  
*Is 50:4c-9a; Ps 116:1-6, 8-9; Jas 2:14-18; Mk 8:27-35*

Some people “give until it hurts.” Others give until it *bleeds*. Then there’s 75 year-old Al Fischer of Massapequa, NY. This unassuming print shop operator has just given his 320<sup>th</sup> pint of blood—40 *gallons* since 1951. According to Harvey Schaffler, Executive Director of Long Island Blood Services, Mr. Fischer’s gift of his blood has helped nearly one thousand people over the years.

Fischer is now engaged in a friendly competition with the only other person in the USA who has donated at least 40 gallons of his own blood: Maurice Wood, a retired railroad inspector from St. Louis. Mr. Wood is 83 years old!

Al Fischer and Maurice Wood are wonderful examples of Jesus’ paradoxical counsel in today’s gospel reading: we gain life as we lose it; and our lives are enriched to the extent that we spend them for others. We can never forget that the cross is also a plus sign (+).

It’s important to recall that Jesus didn’t reveal himself as the suffering Messiah or explain the cost of discipleship in a vacuum. His disciples had just seen him feed over 4000 with very little and heal others who were blind, deaf, couldn’t speak or were possessed. Despite this, they were still largely clueless about his true identity.

So he asked them, “Who do people say that I am?” and more to the point, “But who do *you* say that I am?” Even then, it was only Peter who could answer, “You are the Christ,” i.e., God’s anointed one, the one whom the people of Israel had been waiting for, the one who would liberate them from their oppressors and lead them into not only living the Covenant of their ancestors but the Lord’s promises of land, prosperity and peace.

While Peter knew the right answer, it soon became apparent that he and Jesus weren’t on the same page about its meaning. As soon as Jesus began to teach that being the Christ meant that he, “the Son of Man,” would suffer, be rejected by his own religious leaders, killed and rise again, Peter objected. He must have really been upset, because Mark records that he “rebuked” Jesus, his Lord and master.

Jesus, in turn, was forced to rebuke Peter in the strongest terms possible: “Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.” It’s important to note, however, that even as he was talking to Peter, Jesus was “looking at his disciples.” His message was for all of them, and in effect he was saying, “Don’t get in my way or hold me back from fulfilling my mission.” He needed his friends to “have his back” and to encourage him.

Jesus needed his friends’ support because in truth, he approached the cross in fear as well as in faith. That tension reached its peak when he found himself

praying in the Garden of Gethsemane for his cup of suffering to pass by him; but in the end he submitted to his Father's will.

It was in that moment that the passage that we heard in our first reading from Isaiah 50—a passage which the Lord had likely heard many times in synagogue and which we hear every year on Palm Sunday(a slightly shorter version)—became painfully real. Taking up the cross demanded for Jesus then and demands for us now that like Isaiah's suffering servant we have not only an open ear but also a strong back and a resolute face.

An old African American proverb warns: "Don't say no more with your mouth than your back can stand." With regard to our faith, James puts it another way in today's second reading: "So also faith of itself, if it does not have works is dead...Demonstrate to your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works." As followers of Jesus, our works are where the proverbial rubber hits the road.

Our Catholic tradition has provided us with fourteen wonderful examples of ways in which we make the faith we profess also the faith we live. Because of their origins in Matthew 25, we're probably most familiar with the *Corporal Works of Mercy*:

- Feed the hungry.
- Give drink to the thirsty.
- Clothe the naked.
- Shelter the homeless.
- Visit the sick.
- Visit the imprisoned.
- Bury the dead.

Less familiar but no less important are the *Spiritual Works of Mercy*:

- Counsel the doubtful.
- Instruct the ignorant.
- Admonish sinners.
- Comfort the afflicted.
- Forgive offenses.
- Bear wrongs patiently.
- Pray for the living and the dead.

When Al Fischer was asked why he had donated over 40 gallons of blood over the course of the past six decades he said, "I'm too cheap to give money, so I just give blood." I pray that we, in our own lives of discipleship, self-sacrifice and service, may become even half as "cheap" as Al Fischer. +

