

Homily for Sunday, October 18, 2009
Isaiah 53:1-10; Psalm 33; Hebrews 4:14-16; Mark 10:35-45

When Senator Edward Kennedy died recently, the public was treated to a variety of views of his life and legacy. Foremost among these were his own memoirs, a series of reflections on his personal and public life that included both his triumphs and tragedies, his virtues and his flaws. In addition, there were a host of other tributes, critiques and other assessments of his life. If we were to read them all and sift out both the extreme paeans and mean-spirited assaults, we would probably be left with a more or less complete picture of the man.

Imagine what would happen, however, if after you died there was only *one* available biography about you...and it was written by your most bitter enemy! That's essentially what the Church was left with for many years with St. Callistus, a third century Pope and martyr whose feast we celebrated last week (October 14).

Callistus was a slave whose master put him in charge of a bank for other Christians. When the bank failed, Callistus was held responsible and eventually sentenced to work in the mines of Sardinia, where the conditions were so harsh that most prisoners never left alive. Somehow, however, Callistus survived. Released from the service of his former master, he became a deacon. For all of his flaws, he apparently possessed considerable talent, for he was eventually appointed deacon and counselor to Zephyrinus, the Bishop of Rome, i.e., the Pope!

Zephyrinus made Callistus the administrator of the first Christian cemetery in Rome (now San Callisto). When Zephyrinus died in 217, Callistus—a former slave and convict and still a deacon—was elected Bishop of Rome...much to the chagrin of people like Hippolytus, who believed it was a scandal that the Church should be led by someone with such a checkered past.

By all accounts Hippolytus was a holy man and was in fact later recognized as a saint. However, he didn't suffer fools or sinners gladly; and he believed that there were others—most notably himself—who were far more worthy to serve as Rome's bishop. Hippolytus' often polemical writings about Callistus remain the biggest single source of material we have on his life.

Within a short time, Callistus seemed to realize the worst fears of Hippolytus and his other critics. Most notably, he took a more merciful stand on the readmission of those who had committed serious sins (adultery, fornication, and

murder, for example) back into the communion of the Church. Having been shown great mercy himself, Callistus generously extended that same gift to others.

Within five years of his election, Callistus was martyred in a riot. In a Church often fraught with theological, pastoral and other conflicts, he sought unity urging that “we be all of one mind and that there be no divisions among us.” Perhaps his greatest legacy, though, was his own story of failure, redemption and service. Even as Pope, he never forgot he was once a slave and was willing to lay his own reputation on the line for the reconciliation of others who had failed in life.

In his own way, St. Callistus followed the example of Jesus lifted up in our second reading: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who was similarly tested in every way, yet without sin.” Because of Christ’s own experience of our humanity, we can “confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.”

One of the ways in which we ritualize our “approach to the throne of grace” is through the Sacrament of Penance (Reconciliation). Unfortunately, for many Catholics this sacrament is treated as a once-a-year duty at best. Even worse, there are many, many others who have not gone to Confession for five, ten even twenty years! There are a variety of reasons, ranging from poor or unhelpful experiences of the sacrament in the past to simple pride or overwhelming fear.

In many churches there are now even formal programs to renew participation in the Sacrament of Penance. Perhaps it would be simpler if we just asked people to remember that it is an opportunity not only “to receive mercy” but also “to find grace for timely help.” That’s in part what got me to reflect on my own participation in this sacrament: it’s a chance to have the Lord free me from the burdens of my sins *and* to be empowered with his healing and life-giving spirit.

The Sacrament of Penance is just one of many ways in which God enables us to fulfill our purpose and mission as his people. Believe it or not, God calls us all to greatness! But as Jesus reminds us in the gospel, it is not the “greatness” of the world, which is marked by power over others. Instead, *the godly greatness to which we are called is marked by power with and for others and lived in service.*

It is that kind of greatness that enabled Isaiah’s servant to give “his life as an offering for sin” and to accomplish God’s will. It is the greatness that Jesus embraced on the road to Calvary and the cross. It is the greatness that enabled Callistus, former slave and ex-con, to serve the Church as Pope. Can we make it our greatness, too? +