

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

“When I came to you I was weak and trembling all over in fear.” 1 Corinthians 2, 1-5

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned?...You are the light of the world. Your light must shine before others so that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.” Matt. 5, 13-16



In their book entitled *Alpha Leadership: Tools for Business Leaders Who Want More from Life*, three motivational psychologists (Anne Deering, Robert Dilts & Julian Russell) tell a story from the life of Itzhak Perlman, the renowned Israeli-American violin virtuoso and conductor. Perlman was born in 1945 and grew up in Tel Aviv in what was then known as British Palestine. As a youngster, he contracted polio which left him very restricted in his mobility. For the rest of his life, he has had to get around with the aid of crutches, and braces on his legs. Having studied violin at home during his early years, his talent was recognized and he received a scholarship to the Juilliard School in New York. Perlman has had a distinguished career and was invited to join Yo-Yo Ma (cellist) to play at the inauguration of Barack Obama. He was also soloist for the musical score of the film, *Schindler's List*.

In November 1995, Perlman was the principal soloist in a series of orchestral concerts at the Lincoln Centre in New York. Because of his disability, his entry to the stage is always rather laborious. He uses crutches to reach his seat and then takes a couple of minutes to remove his leg braces and settle himself into a comfortable position to play. In one of these November concerts, he had barely begun to play when a loud crack was heard throughout the auditorium. One of the four strings on his Stradivarius had snapped. It would have been an interminable process for him to put his braces back on and with the aid of his crutches return to the dressing room to select another violin and then repeat his entry process, tune his instrument and then proceed with the concert. Instead, after pausing for a few moments, he signalled the conductor to begin again. The audience was spell-bound.

The authors of *Alpha Leadership* pick up what followed as it was reported by the music critic from the *Houston Chronicle*: “Everyone knows it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. I know that, and you know that, but that night Itzhak Perlman refused to know that. He played with such power and such purity...You could see him modulating, changing, and recomposing the piece in his head...At one point it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get...sounds from them that they had never made before. When he finished there was an awed silence, and then the audience rose as one. We were all on our feet, screaming and cheering - doing everything that we could to show him how much we appreciated what he had done. He smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to quiet us, and then said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone: ‘You know, sometimes it’s the artist’s task to find out how much music he can still make with what he has left.’”

Today's gospel, through its references to salt and light, urges us to "make music" with whatever we have, no matter how old or how limited we are. It is a challenge to refrain from becoming closed in on ourselves and to give of what we are and have in the name of the Gospel, so that both we and others may find life.

If we care to look around us, we'll discover Itzhak Perlman's in many places and situations. I am reminded by today's gospel of two friends who lost one of their teenage sons in a tragic fire. Instead of letting themselves be eaten up by grief and self-pity, they established Compassionate Friends Australia, a support network offering hope and comfort for parents whose children have died.

Then there are those who have pulled themselves up by the bootstraps from depression and addiction. With the little they have, and with the support and encouragement of friends, they have committed themselves to faithful and regular participation in twelve-step programs, thereby bringing light and hope and inspiration to others in similar circumstances as they choose life for themselves.

I am reminded, too, of the women and men on the staff of Australian Catholic University and their peers from the corporate world who are involved in the *Clemente Program*, giving voluntarily of their time and talent to provide tertiary education opportunities to street people and to others who, for one reason or another, have temporarily lost their direction in life.

All of these people, though not perfect, (In fact, they are a little like St. Paul who in the second reading describes himself as "weak and trembling in fear".) still take the risk of letting their light shine. And such behaviour runs the risk of scrutiny and criticism from self-appointed critics.

I suppose it's possible for any of us to be so careful that we end up allowing ourselves no scope for making mistakes or, for that matter, doing much good, either. The gospel challenges us to let our light shine and not to slip into being falsely humble. Whatever we have to offer, we are called to give of it boldly, so that God might be praised in the giving. It's not about self-aggrandisement but about recognizing that all we have is God's gift anyway and, therefore, to be shared with others. We are prepared for this by today's first reading from Isaiah: "Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor. Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives." (Isaiah 58, 7)

All three readings in today's liturgy add up to a concerted effort to give us one very clear message: Until our hope for justice is transformed into activity for justice, until our desire for peace and unity in the world finds expression where we live and work, until our proclaimed belief in God as Father of all is lived out in every one of our relationships, we are not much more than tasteless salt and no more effective than a light hidden under a bucket.