

14th Sunday.07

July 6, 2007

1. Did you see the article in paper about Earl Campbell, a former NFL football player and the winner of the Heisman trophy in 1977? Campbell is now 52 and can hardly walk. The article says: “It now takes him six minutes to walk 40 yards, a distance he used to breeze through in less than five seconds as a punishing running back at Texas and during an eight-year Hall of Fame career in the NFL, mostly with the Houston Oilers.” And it is not only his physical condition that is worrisome. He also seems to be beginning to suffer from Alzheimers, lucid at one moment but at the next unable to remember people and names. When he is lucid, he claims that his present condition is the result of genetics and not his career. But no one else seems to think that this is the case. As the articles says: “He repeatedly led with his head when taking on defenders, raising the question of concussions in addition to the toll taken on his neck and back.” And at the moment many of his fellow football veterans are complaining about the pensions and health care provided them by the NFL.

2. I am not a football fan, but somehow this article caught my attention. Of course the first person I would think of in this vein is Cassius Clay, alias Mohammed Ali, who taught the world that black is beautiful, the boxer of ultimate grace who danced like a butterfly and stung like a bee. Now he, like Campbell, is a shadow of himself.

3. The lesson seems to be a simple one. Our bodies ultimately pay the price we have exacted of them. If we abuse them, we will suffer for the abuse. Our sins against them are plain to see. They appear in the loss of the ability to walk, to bend, to move without pain. And that most important part of us, our brain, also manifests its wounds. It can no longer function as it should.

4. This law which is not limited to athletes. It is a law of life. The way we live leaves traces, yes, sometimes, even physical traces. And sometimes we like to think that this is true not only when we are dealing with bad things but also with the good. Or is that true? Does a good life express itself in a person's body? Can you see the goodness of a person's life in the person's face? Or are we reading into the fact what we know of the person's goodness? Beauty, we are told, is in the eye of the beholder. Is goodness too?

5. If you had never heard of Mother Teresa and then saw a picture of her, what would you think? Certainly, you would not say that this is the face of a beautiful woman. But would you see in that weather-beaten old face compassion and love? Yes, if you know who Mother Teresa was and then look at her picture, that is what you will see. But if you didn't know about her, would you just see the face of an old woman whom you might even call ugly.

6. In today's second reading from Paul's Letter to the Galatians there is talk of bodily signs. Paul warns the men of the community that they are not to put their faith in the sign associated with belonging to the Jewish faith, that of circumcision. He is telling them that they do not have to allow themselves to be circumcised in order to be followers of Jesus. As a born Jew, he of course was circumcised, but he no longer put any stock in that fact. No, instead he put his faith in what he called the marks of Jesus: "From now on, let no one make troubles for me; for I bear the marks of Jesus on my body."

7. What could he mean by that? What were the marks of Jesus on his body? In 2 Cor 12 he says this: "Five times at the hands of the Jews I received forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I

passed a night and day on the deep....” There is more here, but this is enough. Paul’s body could witness to his dedication to Jesus. If he had showed you his back, you could have seen the traces of the lashes and rods he had taken. He bore the marks of Jesus on his body, as we read today in his letter to the Galatians.

8. I suspect that most, if not all, of us here think that we cannot compete with Paul in having suffered physical punishment for our faith. However, if we bear our sicknesses with and for the Lord, we can. And all of us know that in our minds and hearts we have suffered in our struggles to remain true to the Gospel in the particulars of our daily lives. A love foregone because the other was not free to return our love. Anxieties and worries suffered in patience and faith. Yes, in ways not seen, but still very real, all of us can say we bear the marks of Jesus on our souls, on our hearts, on our lives. Whether that shows itself in our faces we leave to the Lord. He certainly can see it. And perhaps those who love us can see it there too.