Upside-down world (Mark 10:35-45)

by Stephen B. Chapman in the October 17, 2006 issue

This portion of the narrative is a continuation and expansion of what has just preceded. The other ten disciples are jealous, are angry with James and John because they have pushed Jesus—successfully—to give them a preeminent share in his destiny. Jesus has not criticized or dismissed their insistent demand but has lovingly transformed it from a desire for glory into a willingness to suffer. Still, why should some of the disciples be granted privileges over the rest? Why won't they all share to the same extent in Jesus' fate ("cup") and special vocation ("baptism")? If all are equally brothers and sisters in Christ, why are some Christians apparently more equal than others? Once again Jesus' words indicate a reversal of values and norms. If "glory" is now about suffering rather than reigning, "ruling" means serving, not lording. The most prestigious person in the messianic kingdom is the one who is not above all but below all—the slave of all, to put it scandalously. And what does that slave metaphor really mean? To do what Jesus himself is doing by giving his life for others—by taking up a cross.

This past summer I officiated at the wedding of two former students. They had chosen 1 Corinthians 13 as their wedding text, and during the service I offered a few words of reflection on the passage with an eye toward its significance for the occasion. I spoke about giving and sharing, how living with other people means that we cannot always have our own way and how in marriage, as in our families and churches, we must place the interests and needs of others above our own. I mentioned that this way of life was Jesus' own and that Paul considered it the basic template for Christian living. It was, I thought, well-trodden homiletical ground. To my surprise, numerous guests at the wedding sought me out later to say that while they liked what I had said, they found it "different" and "unusual." Although all of them were members of churches, they found my description of the Christian life as centered on giving and sharing strange—it is not a doctrine or a feeling but a way of living together with others. What on earth, I wondered, are they hearing in church?

I fear that many churches have relegated primary concerns to the background by pushing secondary matters up front. Two years ago, I heard a Christmas sermon

whose main thrust was the importance of paying bills on time. The pastor said it was an especially important message for the season. Not one word about what it means for us that God in Christ became a human being! More recently, another pastor admitted to me that he still has not addressed the war in Iraq from the pulpit because he does not know what to say. When exactly did it become so difficult to know whether Jesus sanctioned violence? At what point did the idea that all people are created in the image of God lose its currency and appeal? Is there nothing at all to say about the war from the perspective of the Christian faith?

I know that the church has many faithful voices, whose week-in, week-out proclamation of Christ continues courageously in spite of the smug apathy generated by the consumeristic wealth of our culture. Yet the most glaring weakness of contemporary American Christianity is a failure of proportion, and it can be observed almost everywhere. The combination in many churches of an obsession with issues of sexuality and a simultaneous lack of serious engagement with the theological issues at stake in the current war illustrates the point nicely.

I readily understand the growing appeal of high liturgy, Orthodox tradition and icons, premodern biblical interpretation and any worship service with more music and less talking. I understand, too, the suspicion and frustration in many churches and denominations with theological education, with its distance from church life and its mixed constituencies and agendas. People in the pews yearn for theological depth and authenticity. The problem is, they often want that depth without wanting it to make a difference in their lives. They want spirituality but only so long as it does not prevent them from making trips to the mall in their SUV from the gated community they call home.

“It is not so among you.” I am struck by the realization that this statement is an expression of fact rather than a command. Jesus tells the disciples they simply are not a group that can organize itself according to a worldly hierarchy. Instead, an alternative politics is at the heart of their identity. Christian words and actions will flow from this politics, but the politics itself is who they are. Rather than treating church polity as secondary, Jesus insists on the reverse: *first* live as servants of one another and *then* you will know what to say and do as my disciples.

Kindness and compassion are not theoretical principles that the church reflects upon and then seeks to apply to the problems of the world. Kindness and compassion are how the church is to live, and in that concrete form of life the other polities of the world will be instructed and redeemed. So there is a connection between

authoritarian leadership in the church and the church's present difficulty in distinguishing what is central to the gospel from what is not. The Christian leader who belittles someone or puffs up himself or herself at another's expense cannot proclaim the gospel adequately because that leader no longer lives it. This alternative politics is not an extra thing, an add-on for especially holy Christians or Christians with unusually sensitive dispositions. It is not an extra thing at all. It is *the* thing. It is what Jesus was—and is—all about.