

Mysterious power: The privilege of the pastorate

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 13, 2002](#) issue

I love Eugene Peterson's remark that "if you are called to it, being a pastor is the best life there is" (see David Wood's [interview](#)). Like every pastor I have days and seasons when I'm not sure of that. And then Lent comes and Holy Week and Easter, and I can't imagine doing anything other than what I am doing—trying to communicate something of God's truth to my congregation as we rehearse the story of love's strange power and life's victory over death.

What a great privilege it is to be the one to read, tell and reflect on the events of Palm Sunday, with its swirling crosscurrents of passion and emotion—Jesus' triumphal entry to a city that will turn its back on him in five days; the sweet voices of children singing Hosannas in counterpoint to the blunt political forces planning to get rid of him; crowds of pilgrims, poor people mostly, waving palm branches as if they were welcoming a king, while the real authorities, Roman officials and legionnaires with real swords and spears, are doing what they have to do to keep the peace.

What a privilege and responsibility it is to be the one to convey the mystery of the cross in a time when our people and we ourselves, the preachers, are bombarded with the cultural message that the purpose of life is to succeed, to grow, to get all the rewards that are available. What a responsibility in Lent to understand and then help others understand a profoundly counterculture notion that the strange power of love is revealed in weakness. That's a revolutionary idea which takes my breath away each year at about this time, and it forces me always to look carefully and critically at my own ministry and the institution I serve.

The contrast between what the cross represents and how institutions, including the church, go about their business is sharply drawn for me in Lent. In its most dramatic expression the Roman Catholic Church acted for centuries like an empire, and was an empire, with military might and economic influence. All this is symbolized by the

Basilica of St. Peter, the largest church in the world, stunning in size. The plaza outside is surrounded by the three-tiered colonnades of Bernini, one of the most beautiful, most aesthetically satisfying artistic creations in Western civilization. The site exudes power.

But inside the massive doors of St. Peter's is another symbol of power, this one radically different: Michelangelo's *Pietà*—a beautiful woman, cradling in her arms the lifeless body of her son. Noisy tourists become suddenly quiet in front of Michelangelo's masterpiece, pondering the young man who is the focus, the foundation, the reason for all of this—dead, enfolded in his mother's arms. It is the pastor's greatest privilege and responsibility to live with that mystery, not to explain it, but to try to communicate something of its mystery.