

Kevin Nadolski, OSFS
Our Lady Queen of Peace Church
November 23, 2008: Solemnity of Christ the King

I suppose it is a common experience to have a favorite book or movie or TV show, at least one that we really like because it speaks to us. Or, more importantly, we identify with a character in a big way. Thus, my affection for Dr. John Carter on ER—he's coming back!!!—the former priest and author James Carroll in the book *American Requiem*, and a few of the characters in that classic piece of cinematic genius from the '80s, *The Breakfast Club*. (I could start on *Sex in the City* characters, but I don't want to scare anyone. OK, just a bit: Four women have the most intense intimacy with the people in their lives with whom they never have sex; I think we call that chastity in my religious community!)

It's true, isn't it? When we identify with someone, we let their lives guide our own. We let them be a bit of a role model for us. We are able to see our own lives a bit differently. I think that is what makes good entertainment into important art: We see ourselves anew and we move to change our worlds.

In terms of the gospel, I suppose it is pretty natural this morning to identify with those being judged. Once again, we hear those eternity-determining corporal works of mercy, and we ask ourselves: Which camp will we be in? Where would I be sent at the end of that judgment? I think it makes sense for us to identify with those being judged, for not too many of us were ever in prison, homeless, naked, and hungry? Or, were we?

Hungry. Thirsty. Homeless. Dying. Imprisoned. These are pretty severe experiences, and to minimize them may do injustice to those who are materially very hungry, thirsty, homeless, dying, and imprisoned. But perhaps this morning, we need to identify with them in order to help them. Or, at least see them—and the Christ that is in them. Perhaps we can only recognize the Christ in them if we see the hungry, thirsty, homeless, dying, and imprisoned in ourselves.

Church, anyone here ever hungry for affection or affirmation? How about thirsty for some forgiveness or reconciliation?

As for the stranger or homeless...has anyone ever been really lonely? Really lonely. Like feeling alienated because of my orientation, race, political beliefs, or because my Church doesn't seem to speak what's on my heart? Or maybe a Mom, who doesn't feel the joy or delight that her whole world tells her she must be feeling? Maybe our families don't welcome us as they once did. Or, the heart of my best friend is now like a bunker in a war zone, and I am afraid of going near it.

Dying. Has anyone here ever felt a bit of suffocation from the pain of rejection? Or being told, in one way or another, that we don't matter, aren't needed, or can't be a part of someone's life? Or, the worst of all: "I don't love you anymore."

And perhaps the furthest from most of our experiences: the imprisoned. I suspect that most of us have never been to an actual prison, but I think we are all very familiar with

the experience. Anyone ever live behind the bars of addiction, depression, or a paralyzing fear or penetrating worry and anxiety? Does anyone ever feel like we are sentenced to a life that is limited to the pain of the present moment, a pain whose walls feel like they are closing in me?

Pardon all of these questions and examples, but I do think that they are part of our common human experience. They were for Jesus. He had all of these moments in his life, and dare I say that we do, too. We sometimes just forget them, or become so immune to their pain that we do not let it speak to us.

So familiar with today's gospel, we may not realize the next verse that comes in Matthew 26:

When Jesus finished all these words, he said to his disciples, "You know that in two days' time it will be Passover, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."

Maybe the gospel we just heard proclaimed wasn't to make us feel afraid about eternal punishment. Maybe it was Jesus' cry for help because in just two days, he was going to be incredibly hungry and thirsty and alone and dying and in prison. And, he was scared to death!

But, today's Gospel **is** about eternal judgment and our call to see Christ in every last person on the planet. In the unpopular classmate at school, the nerve-wracking in-law at the Thanksgiving Dinner, the nasty colleague, the actual homeless person, the unborn child, the illegal immigrant, the guilty and their guards at Guantanamo, the cold Churchmen we dismiss, and the starving children halfway around the world.

Yet, I think we can only see Christ in them, if we see ourselves in them. Do we have the courage and the wisdom to identify not so much with the judged of the Gospel, but with the least of the Gospel?

The word empathy comes from the Greek word that means "in-feeling." Can we get in to the feelings and worlds of others and see ourselves? Jesus did because he took on our flesh and our experience. Yes, we do meet Christ the Judge, but what an empathic judge he is.

The Word of God is not entertainment, and it is not even art. But the way we can take it into our worlds can make our own lives works of art that are timeless. So timeless that we will experience the joy and peace of eternal blessing in heaven.