Uncommon sense: Sunday, September 17 (Mark 8:27-38)

by Joel Marcus in the August 30, 2000 issue

Often Jesus's words seem perversely contrary to sense. Take, for example, his central bit of advice in our Gospel passage for today: "If anyone wants to follow after me, let him renounce himself and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will destroy it; but whoever will destroy his life for my sake and that of the good news will save it" (Mark 8:34-35, my translation). The New Revised Standard Version, out of a commendable desire to be gender-inclusive, transposes Jesus's singular formulations into the plural ("If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves," etc.). But this paraphrase loses the original's sense of immediacy, of personal address—the impression that each and every individual is confronted by Jesus's call and must say either yea or nay to it.

But what does this call urge its hearers to do? To die, or at least to be willing to do so. And why should anyone want to die? How can dying be the way to find life? Jesus's advice seems to turn common sense on its head.

And yet, as often happens, Jesus's advice is also based on common sense—the sort of down-to-earth, practical wisdom that is dispensed today by people like Ann Landers and Abigail Van Buren, and that fills the Old Testament book of Proverbs. In the seventh century BC the Greek lyric poet Tyrtaeus wrote, "The man who risks his life in battle has the best chance of saving it; the one who flees to save it is the most likely to lose it." In other words, what is most important in the heat of battle is not to lose your head (either figuratively or literally). And it is impossible to keep a cool head if you are trying in a panicky way to steer clear of danger—the fleeing soldier is easily shot in the back. On the other hand, intrepid soldiers sometimes miraculously survive, even when their companions are falling left and right, because they act in a purposeful and deliberate fashion that unnerves the enemy.

Jesus takes this piece of secular, military wisdom and transposes it onto a different plane. The transposition is apt, because Jesus pictures himself as a general in an army, and the present situation as one of fierce battle—the climactic battle, in fact, between God's army and that of the personified power of evil in the world. From the outset of his ministry he announces that God is about to invade the world and smash

Satan's strongholds; in fact, one of the commonest nuances of *euangelion*, the word usually translated as "gospel, "is "good news from the battlefield." Jesus, then, calls people to follow him intrepidly into the final battle, without looking back, without hesitating, without giving a thought to the danger that such following might pose to their lives. And he promises that those who do so will, against all expectation, find life.

But wait a second! What sort of battle is going on here? And what sort of general is Jesus? Generals don't usually end up being crucified—unless they're bad generals. Yet this Jesus, this would-be Messiah, ends his life nailed to a Roman cross, dying through a mode of execution so horrific that it was considered to be appropriate only for slaves. And Christian theology has always seen this terrible, degrading death as a victory, indeed the victory by which God vanquished the power of evil once and for all.

Through that victory, the church believes, a strange vitality has been released into the world, a spirit of hope that still erupts in arenas of weakness, suffering and death. Recently a friend described to me her 20-year battle with cancer, a battle which she had thought she had won ten years ago, but which she has had to begin fighting anew in recent years. There is a difference, she says, between the battle she waged 20 years ago and the one she has waged in the past five. This time she has sensed a Presence with her, one that she identifies with the suffering Christ, who assures her that everything is going to be OK. And the hard part is that she doesn't know exactly what "OK" means in this context—whether it means, for example, that she's going to live, or whether it means that she's going to die. Despite that uncertainty, she feels she can trust this "voice" she hears when it says that everything is going to be all right.

There is a price to be paid for such assurance; it involves looking death coldly in the eye. But that is a price that we will all eventually have to pay. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn describes how he learned to do this amid the starvation and brutality of a Soviet prison camp:

> "From the moment you go to prison you must put your cozy past firmly behind you. At the very threshold, you must say to yourself, 'My life is over, a little early, to be sure, but there's nothing to be done about it. I shall never return to freedom. I am condemned to die—now or a little later

> . . .’” Confronted by such a prisoner, the interrogator will tremble. Only the man who has renounced everything can win that victory.

Solzhenitsyn discovered in the gulag what my friend also knows—that there is a strength that comes from renunciation of life, a strength that triumphs even over the powers that threaten death. Death, the last enemy, has already been defeated by Jesus’s rising from the dead. That is his victory, that is how he wins the final, apocalyptic battle over the power of Satan. And that event means that death will not be allowed to speak the last word over us either—thanks be to God!