

The unfettered and inexhaustible Gospel

So, already I have mentioned the name of Gino Bartali. Gino Bartali was, apparently, a very pious individual—presumably, a pious Roman Catholic. In fact, along with—as I understand from reading this article [from *Le Devoir*—along with people who looked after his physical well-being, he had a confessor, who went along with him. Fairly remarkable.

And, of course, the person I am talking about is this man who, in the 1930's, won, first of all, *La Tour d'Italie*, and then the *Tour de France* in 1938. He was 22 when he won the *Tour d'Italie* [in 1936], and, obviously 24 when he won the *Tour de France* in 1938. And then, the war intervened, of course, and the *Tour de France* did not happen until after the war. He won again the *Tour de France* in 1948.

So the piety of this man is maybe not entirely evident. Apparently, when he won the *Tour de France*, the first time, when he finished a certain lap, he would stay there and smoke a cigarette and wait for the others to come. And, apparently, he said, the nicotine helped increase his heart beat, which was too slow. I don't know how you figure that in a cyclist.

So the piety of this man was perhaps not entirely evident by his accomplishments. But, at the same time as he was training, actually, for races, during wartime, something else was going on. In fact, he was part of the Italian resistance; and, on his 200-kilometre runs, he had stored in the tires of his bicycle, false documents—and also in the handle bars, and in the seat of the bicycle. As a result of that, some 800 Jews were able to flee Mussolini's fascist Italy of the time, which was increasingly influenced by Nazism, the Nazism, of course, of Hitler. So, some 800 Jews were able to escape. In another tour from Florence to Genoa, he collected money in Genoa which had come out of Switzerland, in order to support the resistance effort in Italy.

One of the remarkable things is that this man, as I indicated earlier in the service, said nothing to anybody—maybe he did to his confessor; but he said nothing to anybody—including his wife, of what he had done in wartime. And, it's only now, for example, that the State of Israel is honouring him as one of the "righteous Gentiles"; they have a special memorial in Israel called Yad Vashem. In fact, it wasn't until 2003 that one publication in Italy let on that perhaps this man was part of the Italian resistance.

I've already—again—mentioned some of his sayings, which, obviously, had some reference to himself, that "some medals were not attached to one's uniform; they were attached to one's very being, one's soul" and his other comment that "the good is not something you that you talk about; it's something that you do."

Well, the picture of this man and what he accomplished, I think, connects quite well with our gospel passage from Mark's gospel, where we encounter Jesus, Jesus who has just recently experienced considerable—shall we say—"success" or crowd approval. He has been in the synagogue in Capernaum where he has cast out an unclean spirit. He is then at the home of Peter's (or Simon's) mother-in-law, and is able to cure her of a fever, so that she is able to continue the serving that she had been doing, or would wish to do, presumably. He also provided well-being and health to many others at an evening gathering.

So, one might expect that Jesus might want to build on his "successes", so to speak. And that is what Simon—otherwise known as Peter—evidently had in mind when he finally tracked Jesus down, who was praying in a deserted place; and said, "Everyone is looking for you." And

Jesus said [to paraphrase matters], “Well, there is a wider mission involved; let’s go on to these other little towns, and proclaim the message there also.” So, rather than being tied up with all the attention he had already elicited, here he went on his way to further communities to proclaim the message of the Kingdom of God.

Now—although the passage itself does not tell us this directly—one of the persons he meets, going on to these other communities, is a leper. Now, of course, lepers in that time were people who lived on the perimeter of communities. And so, it wasn’t surprising that Jesus, who was departing from Capernaum, would meet up with a leper.

There is an encounter there. The man is cleansed of his leprosy. And Jesus has a couple of instructions to give the man. One instruction is that he go and present himself to the priest—in Jerusalem, presumably—and do what the law required of him. And the second direction was that he tell no one about this. But the man did not—at least in the second part of the direction—he did not do as Jesus commanded to. He went out and blabbed all that had happened to him, to everyone that could hear, with the result that Jesus was not free to go into these various communities, but had to stay in deserted places.

So, in the case of Jesus, he resisted simply following up on with what everyone else was telling him to do. And that derived, as the passage might indicate, from his relationship with the Father, which was made real and concrete, thanks to prayer that he offered to God.

The passage also tells us that the first encounter that he has is with a person who is one of the less-desirables to encounter—a leper, whom he actually touched, and made clean. A bit of a parallel, then, to Gino Bartali, and all of these Jews whom that man helped to save.

But then Jesus’ own plan to keep things quiet was foiled by that leper, like Gino Bartali, whose plan [to keep things quiet] has only now been foiled; and he is now dead for some twelve years. He died in 2000—this long-distance cycling champion.

Well, what, conceivably might there be an application to in our own situation, our own lives? Is there any application, other than to remark on what people of strength of character, who stick to their guns, or stick to what they feel is ultimately important, and who do not want to make a big show of what they do? Is that the message that we could derive? Well, surely, that’s part of it.

But, perhaps, also, given this time of year, which is usually the time of year associated with annual meetings and the like (but ours is postponed until May), the church focuses a great deal on matters concerning money. And that discussion, especially in the current time, can be a difficult discussion, because the church—shall we say—is not all that flush with cash. In fact, it operates in a decidedly negative financial position, drawing on reserves. So the discussion can be difficult. And that discussion can also impact how we relate to one another as human beings.

So, given that context—the context which we experience as the Church, in this place, in this time—perhaps we could benefit from taking some direction or some suggestion from the pattern of Gino Bartali, and, of course, of Jesus, who didn’t want a great show. Perhaps we can sneak in a little bit of kindness, a little bit of generosity, into our relations with one another, so that other forms of discussion, which are difficult, and hard to carry out in a positive way—in order that those discussions can be influenced for the good.

And that bringing in a little kindness, bringing in a little generosity, doesn't need to be very public. It can be quite quiet; it can be quite invisible perhaps. But it could have the impact that Christ our Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ, would wish for the Church—that people's hearts and lives are changed for the good.

It's somewhat interesting that, in Mark's gospel, right at the end, there is, of course, an account of the women at the tomb. And, unlike all the other gospels, Mark's gospel ends by saying that these women who had an encounter with the empty tomb and with an angel, or at least, a young man dressed in white, left that tomb, not saying anything to anyone, "because they were afraid". Well, obviously, eventually they did say something. But saying something is not ultimately what it's about. Ultimately, it's what God has done, in the case of the resurrection, of course; and that was having a big impact on those women who left the tomb, the empty tomb.

Good is not what we talk about, as Gino Bartali said; it is what we do. And so, let our good deeds be quiet, be positive, so that there is a change, hearts are being healed, and lives are being made richer and more peaceful, as a consequence of those deeds.