

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

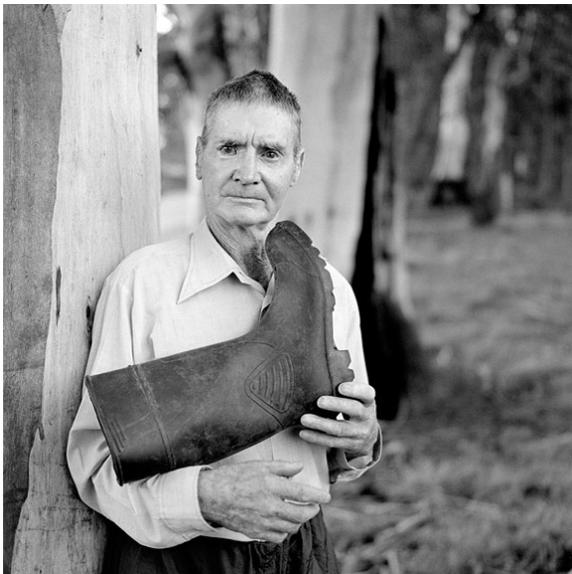
Cycle A, 1.26.20

Isaiah 8:23-9:3/

1 Corinthians 1:10-13,17/Matthew 4:12-23

KEEPING HOPE ALIVE IN OUR HEARTS

I want to share a story about Cliff Young. Cliff was an Australian potato farmer, who back in 1983 at the age of sixty-one, won the Sydney to Melbourne Ultramarathon – a distance of 544 miles! As a child he lived in a one-room bark hut with six brothers and sisters during the Great Depression. As an adult he never married and lived with his mother. For this “ultramarathon” he showed up to the starting line of the race in overalls and rain boots. The assembled media took one look at him, shoved a microphone in his face, and asked him: “What’s it going to be like when you keel over and die of a massive heart attack a hundred and fifty meters in to the 875-kilometer race?”



So he told them: "I grew up on a farm where we couldn't afford horses or a four-wheel drive vehicle. So, whenever the storms would roll in, I'd have to go out and round up the sheep. We had 2,000 head of sheep, and we have 2,000 acres. Sometimes I would have to run those sheep for two or

three days. It took a long time, but I'd catch them. I believe I can run this race; it's only two more days. Five days. I've run sheep for three days." The first thing the guy did before the race began was to take out his false teeth; he said they rattled when he ran. His run was more like a shuffle than a sprint and, when the race began, he was the last one, eating the dust of all the under-thirty runners with their \$400 Nikes and Adidas. For eighteen hours the runners blew down the road as old Cliff shuffled on behind. When nighttime came the runners would stop, make camp at the roadside and sleep. That was the pattern – eighteen hours of running and six hours of sleep. The runners repeated that for five, six or seven days til they reached the finish line. The darkness sets in. Runners sleep. Cameras get turned off. Reporters go to bed.

Surviving on hot chocolate and cups of water, Cliff Young shuffled down the highway for five days, fifteen hours, and four minutes straight and won the race. He'd broken the all-time record for the Sydney to Melbourne Ultra Marathon. By two days. Do you know how he won? He never slept. While the other runners were taking their six-hour rest, Cliff kept running – running through the dark. The second-place runner crossed the finish line nine hours after old Cliff. You see, it turned out that when Cliff Young said he chased sheep around his farm for three days, he meant he'd single-handedly manually herded a flock of frightened animals across 2,000 acres of farmland for *three days straight without stopping or sleeping.*

We heard it in both the Old Testament reading and today's gospel: *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.* There's a hope that we must always keep alive in our hearts, a hope that urges us to continue no matter how much darkness

surrounds us – the clouds of financial worries, the weight of personal addictions, the hopelessness of giving up on important relationships, the frustration of political tensions in our government, the conflicts in the Church, the violent clashes in our world. It takes courage to keep going when we're stuck in the dark. It's taking great courage for a parishioner whose facing health issues and her husband's job loss to hold onto the hope that things will get better. It takes determination for a couple whose relationship is on the rocks to seek the help of a counselor and get themselves back to a loving place again. It takes guts and bravery for immigrant parents to want a better and safer life for their children that they're willing to abandon home and country to find it. All of them have got to keep running through the dark.



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose legacy we recently celebrated, said: *"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."* His conviction, both in word and in deed, helped to change a nation and transform it into a more just and open society. We still have a long way to go and we dare not lose that legacy. The darkness doesn't understand the light, doesn't comprehend the light, doesn't get the light, doesn't overcome the light, doesn't *master* the light. Our parish school's

motto that many of us proudly display with a circular bumper sticker says it well: *Believe there is Good in the World... Be the Good!* In light of today's scripture, we can express that motto another way: *Believe there is Light in the World... Be the Light!* Only words of Light can drive out worlds of dark. Only deeds of Light can drive out depths of dark. Only lives of Light can drive out lies of dark. You can always hold the Word of God like a ball of light right there in your hand, right up there to warm your heart. You can always count on it: Jesus is bendable Light, warmth around every unexpected corner.



St. Francis de Sales, the patron of my religious order whose Feast Day was on Friday, wrote: *If we walk steadily and faithfully, God will lift us up to greater things.* Like Cliff, when others may seem to be running faster, we can just shuffle on with perseverance and keep looking for the light. When our vocation feels like a yoke that burdens, when our job weighs us down like a pole on our shoulders, when it feels like the people around us are wielding the rod of a taskmaster – look for the light. Remember the prophecy: *Upon those who dwelt in a land of gloom, a light has shone.* Do we succumb to the despair of the circumstances in which we find ourselves, or do we live as if the God we read about and talk about and sing about is really God?

Do we cower in the darkness only dreaming of a better future? Or do we live as if the light of that future is as much a reality as the darkness around us?

There's a wonderful postscript to Cliff Young's Ultramarathon victory. He won the prize for coming in first - \$10,000. In 1983 that would have been a very big windfall. When he got the check for the money, he told the race organizers he wasn't actually aware there was a prize for winning. Then he said he felt badly that he should get the prize money when the other five runners who finished worked just as hard as he did, so he divided the ten grand equally among all the finalists in the race, keeping none of it for himself. Maybe Cliff, who shuffled in darkness but saw a great light, fulfilled another prophecy from Isaiah: *You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing... as people make merry when dividing spoils.* Boys and Girls: Believe there is Light in the world. Like Cliff, the ultramarathon runner, like your loving parents, like your dedicated teachers, with your fellow students:



Be the Light...
be the light of Christ...
for our school, for our community
and for our world.

John Kasper, OSFS