

"New Specs"

Homily of April 28, 2002

by Fr. Michael Dibble

I have a friend who, he goes to the drugstore and he buys - you know, those inexpensive glasses? You get them for about \$10? They are really magnifying glasses, and they have different numbers on them - one fifty, one seventy-five, two hundred, depending on how strong they should be. They're only about ten bucks each. He sweeps up a batch periodically and then he loses them, can't find them. And then when he does find a pair, "These aren't right! (because he just grabs them!), I need new specs!" His wife, Coris, hears that regularly, "I need new specs! New spectacles! The right kind - where I can see."

In the Gospel today, our Lord is telling these 11 men, because by then Judas had gone, that they need a new pair of specs - that they're going to live forever! Not all the Jews believed in an afterlife, just the Pharisees did as a matter of fact. You're going to live forever; you need a new pair of specs, clear and sharp, about heaven. I'm sure a few of them, they're just as human as you, just as human as I am - "Yeah, pie in the sky. Pie in the sky, we want something now."

But our Lord is insistent on it. And if some people want to say, "Well, Jesus is trying to bribe us with heaven", fine. But Jesus is very clear - "You need a new pair of specs, I'm going to prepare a place for you." So that's the acronym for tonight - specs. S-P-E-C-S. Not pie in the sky, not "Oh who cares what happens when I die."

Our Lord, this is not even a saint or a pope, this is Christ. The night before he's going to die (you don't tell lies or fables the night before you're going to die), "There are many places waiting for you, and I'm going to set one up for you."

OK, the first "S" of the acronym SPECS is SAFETY. Safety, at last. You know, I rarely attempt an athletic analogy, but I'm going to try tonight. (Laughter.) Most of the ones I'm comfortable with are movies or books, but ... ninth inning, bases loaded, and the guy from third base slides into home, and the umpire says, "Safe!" I know that's right because I checked with two jocks. (Laughter.) Safe! So, how do you transmute that into heaven? The ultimate umpire, our Lord, we get to heaven (I know it's childish, but it's how I remember), and you're safe forever. Safe at home, safe at home. As a friend of mine, the same guy who keeps losing his glasses ("I need new specs!") he says about heaven, "That's the second half of faith!" All your lives, including this very minute, and mine, and the servers, all our lives, we're holding on to faith and hope. But when we get

to see Christ in the face in paradise, we don't need faith or hope any more. We're safe - charity, love will go on forever. The man says, "That's the second half of faith, is paradise!" And our Lord says, "He will wipe (this is Christ talking now - when in doubt, hear Christ out!) He'll wipe every tear from our eyes." Those are Jesus' words - He'll wipe every tear from our eyes. All the former things, all the bad things, the doubts and the sins and mess-ups, in and out of the Church - all gone. Safe at home.

The "P" of SPECS is PLEASURE. Now, we don't get many explanations of the pleasure of paradise, but I think I told you once about a year ago, that when I was a kid I thought it sounded hooooorribly boring! Walking around this throne with the Father, with the beard, and our Lord, and the Holy Ghost flapping like a dove - and we're walking around ... forever ... "Holy God, Holy God, Holy ... God!" (Laughter.) Our Lord never bored a single human being on planet earth, why would He bore us forever? The pleasures of heaven are hard for us to understand because we are human and fallible. Can I give you one little example?

Let's just take music. When I was a kid in the eighth grade, there was a love song out. I thought it was terrific! It was called "Ricochet." "I don't want no ricochet romance, I don't want no ricochet love, I will be your only boyfriend, your little turtledove." (Laughter.) Judging from the laughter, I gather you don't get the full erotic impulse of that song! (More laughter!) But I loved it - I said, "that's a love song!" Never forget, eighth grade, "I don't want no ricochet romance!" And then, couple of years later, it was my summer job; I was working at Columbia in the library, and you'd go outside for lunch. And I had a bologna sandwich and someone behind me had a little portable radio. And it was a love song on the portable radio. This is about three years later. It was the "Love Death" song from Wagner's Tristan. At the end of that great opera, where, Isolde, the beautiful heroine is holding the dead body of her lover, and she sings the Liebestod, the day she will die and they will be united forever. I was eating a bologna sandwich, outdoors there on the steps of Columbia and this music; if you know the Liebestod, it builds and it builds and it builds and it's completed - it washes over you like waves! I remember every little hair on my even-then scrawny little arms was standing up straight! Wow! It's like Ravel's Bolero - it builds and builds, goes to a crescendo and it's completed. I thought, "Oh, wow! That's what they mean by Grand Opera, that's a love song," and Ricochet wasn't doing it for me anymore. (Laughter.)

That's why our Lord and the Bible gives us very few descriptions of paradise - it's compared to a great party, a banquet, and reunion with all your beloved people, and music. Those are just samples, but our Lord says He's gone to prepare a place for us. If He never bored anyone on earth, He's not going to bore us.

Now I'm told that Oprah Winfrey has stopped recommending books, but I have just begun. (Laughter!) I've mentioned to you an author whose name, he's a convert; he's a college professor - a convert. His daughter almost died of cancer; he's been through the

mill. He's a great writer; he's a new Catholic, he's written a book. His name is Kreeft - it's easy to remember - "I leafed through Kreeft." And this one, the title is inane; the book is terrific; it's rooted in solid Catholic scholarship, scripture, theology. It's called "Everything You Wanted to Know About Heaven But Were Afraid to Ask". I know, the title is inane, but the book is terrific, about the pleasures of paradise - you won't be bored. And you get a taste of it, as I did with that music of Wagner, you've all had a little taste of it.

Our Lord says, "Many dwelling places." I used to think, when our Lord said at the Last Supper, "In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places," that He meant different degrees of holiness. That some would be in the penthouse, and others of us would be way down in the cellar, but safe. No, I checked up on all the scholars this weekend. Many dwelling places means, and the Jewish audience listening to Jesus, those 11 guys knew what He meant, it means, "Plenty of room!" Sometimes you hear people say, "Oh, why should I bother God with my prayers, he has so many people in real pain and suffering," there's plenty of room for your prayer, and her prayer and mine. And in His Father's house - plenty of rooms for all of us, plenty of room - that's what it means.

The E of SPECS is EXPLORATION, Explanation, Exploration. I've never been to Yosemite, and people still draw back, "You haven't been to Yosemite?" But I'm told that you go there, and it's gorgeous and people explore the Grand Canyon, people explore Paris in April, "You've never to Paris in April?" You know what I mean. That certain things are so beautifully, sublimely dazzling. Well, we are told in the Bible that we get to see Christ in the face, when we're reunited with our loved ones in paradise, we shall explore the universes, the cosmos, we'll never be bored! It will be wonderfully thrilling and exciting, without any doubts and fears. CS Lewis said, the guy I love along with Kreeft, "It's a hunger every human being has to know and know and go on knowing." When you're hungry, there's such a thing as food. When you're thirsty, there's such a thing as drink - water. When you're looking for love, there's Igor or Tallulah. Well, every human being knows what it is to say, "Why?" It's not just Catholics! It's a common thing, "I want to know, I want to find out!" If all the other appetites have responses on earth to a limited degree, our burning hunger to know will be fully, wonderfully, enthrallingly explored in the life after death.

Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the Life. I am the way - come with me." The C is CLARITY. Oh, what a blessing! Clarity at last! No more debates! No more, "Why do you allow this, how can you permit this?" I remember when we did it in the seminary. "The reason why God permits suffering is that he has two wills." I remember taking the notes and underlining in green! "God's will for us is either positive - good things, happiness, peace, serenity, family - or permissive. And the permissive will is why he allows suffering and grief and death and acne and baldness and other things." (Laughter.) I remember thinking "OK, that's neat, that's wonderful. Doesn't help! Doesn't help me! Oh, this is your permissive will - that I look like this? This is your

permissive will?" There will be no more debates - you won't have to debate with stoics (who are frequently very admirable people). But they're stoics, "Grin and bear it! There is no God, there is no afterlife! Grin and bear it! Do it with dignity!" And then there are the existentialists, "I don't need a bribe from God - I am good because I am good!" And the debaters, there is still a corner of what I laughingly call my mind that still debates, "Well, how come? And If? And why do you?" In the Bible, God comes down to Job in the Old Testament and says, "Shut up. (Laughter.) I love you, I'm not going to give you an answer, I'm going to give you a person. I'm going to give you Me, and in time, Christ. So shut up, hang on and trust me." No, we won't have to do that anymore. Your dogged faith, that brought some of you to this Mass tonight, dogged faith - no more! Clarity! Oh, oh! Philip says, "Show us the Father!" In theology, that's called theophany. A theophany is kind of where there's a big explosion - sometimes I wish that would happen at Mass, "Take and eat, this is my body." (Sound effect. Feigns clapping. Laughter!) So Philip is asking for a theophany, it's very human. Despite the technical theological word, he wants something. Well in heaven we're going to get it. We're going to have it always, a long, blissful, sublime "wow." No more debates, no more questions.

Do you know, some of you, that Marcel Marceau is still alive, the great French pantomime genius? I saw Marceau, I guess, in 1949. A mime is an actor who goes through sketches and skits without using any language. And Marcel Marceau must be in his 80s by now, and he comes out as a clown, Bip. I'll never forget, I was in the last row of the Palace Theatre in New York City, when he did "Life and Death and ..." - three dots; that was his little gig. It lasted about ten minutes, and Marceau, without a word - just a flute off the stage - enacts a baby in his mother's womb, and the baby's born, the baby grows up and falls in love goes to a job and drives a car and gets sick, and dies. And it was Marceau and a flute and one light beam from the top of the balcony, and the moment (Marceau was a practicing Catholic) when Marceau, playing this man's life without a word dies, the light went out. And then they came out for a split second, and Marceau looks something like this (amazed face). I thought, "That's it. The clarity of seeing Christ in the face, of reunion with all the people that we loved who've died - that's paradise." That's clarity. Jesus says to Philip, "He who sees Me, sees the Father. Make a decision - follow Me or be a pagan." I can't understand people who kind of dabble. Follow Christ, or just be an atheist pagan. But if he's right, and if we look at Him, and if what He's saying is what God wants us to believe and how God wants us to trust, how much crazily in love with us God is - OK, between the two things I take Jesus. And when I die, there will be clarity and no more debates.

And the last is SALUTATIONS, you know, greetings? That's the best. I was a young priest, I heard a little kid, in the little town I told you about (Millbrook, upstate New York)? And she was at supper, and her grandmother had died within the past seven or eight days. And this little girl said, over the pasta, "Grandma was in my room last night." I didn't laugh, and nobody there laughed. "Grandma was in my room last night."

CS Lewis says too many people throughout the planet, not just Christians, have that sense of presence of someone you've loved and lost, peacefully there, just for a moment. "Grandma was in my room last night."

I can't wait to meet some of these people - and the greetings we will have! This is from Christ, not Walt Disney. It's from Christ - the greetings we'll have! "Oh, hello!" Or, "God, I'm so sorry. Now, I can say I'm sorry." I can't wait to meet Jean - let me give her full name, I don't care if it's on the Internet! Her name is Jean Hamilton. The summer before I entered the seminary, I dated Jean Hamilton. She was the most beautiful redhead in Western Christendom. She was fifteen, and I was fifteen and half or something. I took her to a couple of movies and I had dinner with her family. And then I entered the seminary. Now the week after I was ordained a priest, I looked up some classmates; Jean was an Ursula nun at the College of New Rochelle! Now, when I get to heaven, I'll want to say to Jean, "Jean, did you join the convent when you found out that I was no longer available?" (Laughter!) And that reaction is why I've never asked her on this earth!

So we're just about done with SPECS - the great artist Matisse. Matisse, as you know, toward the end of his career, the great French artist Matisse, used to do just sketches and drawings. About when we get to heaven, so many of us, out of both a deep faith but also one rather rooted in fear, think that God will open this vast book (I know you're heard these examples often), and all the things we did wrong, all the imperfections and flaws - serious sins in some cases - when you read solid Catholic theology you find out, that it's all the tiny good things that are recorded, the will bring us into His arms.

When Matisse was an old man, a friend brought him to an exhibit - the Matisse exhibit. And all they had in this little place in France, this little museum in France, were some of Matisse's little sketches, hundreds of small sketches that Matisse had done - some on paper, some in ink, some in crayon, and they were all framed. And Matisse was an old guy, and he looked around (he held onto his friend's arm, because he was so weak he could barely walk), and he sat down hard. And he said, "They've put them in frames!" He was so delighted and amazed! "They've put these little sketches in frames!" Yeah, because the sketches were wonderful! Hundreds that he'd long since forgotten! I deeply believe, and so do the most solid Catholic theologians, that that's what shall usher us into heaven. All the good things we've done, that God keeps using you and me, despite how weak and how dumb we can sometimes be, all those good things will be framed.

OK, quick review for Tuesday's quiz: Safety, Pleasure, Exploration, Clarity, Salutations. New pair of specs, and plenty of room!