

"More Than a Carpenter"

Homily of August 11, 2002

by Fr. Brian Joyce

That Gospel passage reminds me of an incident that I shared with the Adult Education session last Monday night. Some twenty years ago, I was pastor at St. Monica's in Moraga. And Father Mario Borges was the associate pastor, and he took to wearing a t-shirt that said, "My boss is a Jewish carpenter." Now, one parishoner who didn't quite get the concept came up to him and said, "I didn't know that Brian was Jewish."

The reason this passage makes me think of it is that Jesus was a carpenter and moved on to be an itinerant preacher, but there are all these scenes where Jesus is telling fishermen how to do their jobs, and what to do. In one scene, He is telling them to cast their net to the right side after they have been working all night. Another scene, there is a storm, and He tells them, "Don't worry about it." Another scene, He walks to them across the waves and tells them to come to Him. And, I wouldn't be surprised if they would look at this carpenter turned rabbi and say, "Excuse me, but aren't you just a little out of your field?" Or "Aren't you just a little beyond your depth?" Or, "We've looked to You for a lot of things but the last thing we've looked to is advice on fishing and on the sea."

And that is a little familiar because in our daily lives, in our opinions, in our decisions, in our positions and in our politics we usually tend, at least consciously, to keep religion and faith and Jesus out of it. There was that saying, very popular a few years ago, "What would Jesus do?" We even had the little bracelets, "WWJD," to remind us, "What would Jesus do?" And it doesn't exactly work because the questions we have in our daily lives are not answered directly in the Bible. There is no exact answer from Jesus. There is no magical solution. There is no automatic response. And, as a matter of fact, if you really are honest or if I am honest with myself, most of the time when we say, "What would Jesus do?" and we come up with an answer, we come up, not with what Jesus would do if He were me, but what would I do, or what would I tell Jesus to do, if I were He. And that's a little different.

So, in our daily lives and in our opinions and in our political thoughts and positions we unconsciously, or at least silently, end up saying, "Don't you think you are a little out of your field, a little beyond your depth?" or "It's not you that we look to for an answer for these practical things." So the question we are faced with as believers is how do we take the values of Jesus and the vision of Jesus and the wisdom and the viewpoints of Jesus and allow it to weigh in, in our decisions? And here's the real rub: since we are Catholic Christians, how do we allow that community and that Church that tries to follow Jesus to weigh in when we are making our personal decisions?

I think it was after this Mass last weekend, someone came up to me and a friend or neighbor had asked her, "Have you taken Jesus into your life?" And we talked about what the Catholic answer to that was. And, only afterwards, did I think the Catholic answer to the question "Have you taken Jesus into your life?" is "Yes, and then some." or "Yes, with a slightly bigger crowd." because the distinctive thing about being a Catholic Christian and, as a matter of fact, the distinctive thing about being a New Testament Christian is we don't believe in conversion to Jesus. We believe in conversion to Christ in community, not in isolation and not in private piety. And we won't find that among the disciples either. So, we are in the midst of a community, a tradition and leadership that's called to enrich our belief in Jesus, to apply it to our lives, to hold us accountable so we are not just out there on our own, and also a community, tradition, and leadership that, quite frankly, gets it wrong some of the time and gets in the way some of the time. And a number of times, we end up saying to the Carpenter and especially to the Carpenter's church, "Excuse me, but when it comes to my personal life and private decisions and public politics, aren't you a little out of your field, or aren't you beyond your depth, or I'm not able to agree, or I'd rather not."

Give you four quick examples.... One, I think, is a very personal level. In our private lives, we are dealing with pain or depression or a career change or a divorce, and we end up doing it very privately without that sharing and support that would be suggested if we belonged to something called "the Jesus people" or Christian Community. That is one example.

Another example would be, in our own area today, there is discussion of putting a mental health facility for rehabilitation over on Patterson. And a lot of the neighbors are in opposition to that. As a matter of fact, our Social Justice Committee is inviting people to sign a petition in support of it or to discuss that after Mass. Now, how do we come to decisions? Well, I can see how you come to that decision, first of all, out of personal fear of what would happen and, secondly, out of concern over property values. But the question for me today is "Where do our Gospel values rank on the list, or weigh in, in making that decision?"

Or, another one.... death penalty. We know Pope John Paul II and the United States Bishops as a whole have said there is almost no case anymore in our society where the death penalty is justified. The media tell us in their polls that a huge number of Catholics disagree with that. Now, where do we come to that decision? I would think out of anger when seeing innocent people killed, out of concern for the victims, out of worry about our own safety, out of hope for deterrence. But the question I would ask today is, in all of that figuring out of our decision, where do our gospel values and those of our Church weigh in, if at all?

One last example.... a lot of talk these days about invading Iraq and about taking out

Saddam Hussein. Now, don't worry. I am not going to ask for a show of hands. But, there is the same question. In all the discussion and talk shows and everything else, where do our gospel values and our Church's teaching weigh in, if at all? How do we put decisions together and become like the fishermen, who acted wisely and well when they listened to One Who was a carpenter, and more than a carpenter?

Now, it is interesting. I think you all know what the Church's teaching is on making moral decisions. Teaching is that the priority and the final judgment in making moral decisions is with our own personal conscience. But how do we shape and form that conscience? That's not always easy.... Share a story.....

A man consulted with his physician. "I have a terrible problem," the man said. "Lately I have been carousing and misbehaving. It's been happening more and more frequently, and now my conscience is beginning to trouble me deeply. My conscience is bothering me a lot. Can you give me something that will help me out?" The doctor replied, "Oh, I see. You want me to give you something to strengthen your will power."..... "No," the patient protested. "That's not it. I don't want to strengthen my will power. I want you to give me something that will weaken my conscience." ...Do you ever have that feeling?

I want to suggest five steps, and I have suggested them in the past, but I think they are worth repeating when we, as Catholic Christians are facing moral, and particularly public decisions. The first step always is, if we are believers, to somehow stay in touch with, and keep going back to Jesus, His stories, His words, His teaching, and His wisdom so that, maybe not consciously, but maybe unconsciously, the mind of Jesus begins to flavor our attitudes and our decisions and our life. That is the first thing.

The second thing, when we are faced with a moral decision that we have to make, is to get the facts, not to make our decision on the basis of presumptions or first reactions or preferences or fear or biases, but to do our homework and to get the facts. The reason for that is morality is not based on rules and regulations and please hear this clearly.... Morality is not based on the Bible. Morality is based on reality, on getting it right. In fact, that is what the Bible is telling us to do: Get it right! So we have to do our homework and get the facts, and not just judge by instincts.

The third thing, because we are Catholic Christians, is to welcome and insist that our spiritual leaders, especially our Bishops, speak out on major issues. Why? First of all, because that is part of what it means to be a Catholic, although it is very uneven. For example, I have a lot of confidence in Bishop John Cummins and his views on things. I have zero confidence and zero tolerance for Cardinal Law's views on things in Boston. And Pope John Paul II, I have enormous admiration and respect for. He is a great spiritual leader, but I think he has a few blind spots, maybe particularly around women's issues today. But we still welcome and insist on them speaking out; for

example, because we know that in Germany before the Second World War terrible things were happening and the position of the Catholic leadership was zero, to be silent. And we never want that to happen again. And we know that we belong to a tradition, a community, that has to keep trying to do its level best to apply the teachings of Jesus to today.

Now, the fourth thing, after being touched with Jesus and His stories, do our homework, and welcome our spiritual leaders to speak, is to listen, not just to their conclusions, but their arguments. What are the reasons they give? And really find out their reasons and not just their conclusions.

And, then, the fifth and final step is to follow our consciences. After we have done our homework, to follow our consciences. And, if it is in disagreement with that teaching, we keep the door wide open for future revisiting or review, in case there is new information. Now, most of the kind of things I am talking about are public issues. Certainly, wherever our bishops have spoken, it has been on death penalty and gun control and welfare and immigration and fair housing and right to work and collective bargaining and nuclear weapons and the economy. What is very important and precious to us as Americans, and I think as human beings, is separation of Church and State. We need that, and to honor that. But that does not mean separation of conscience from values or separating religion from reasoning or separating priorities from our politics or separating morality from our society. That is why Pope Paul VI once said, "Politics is the highest form of charity there is."

One last story..... Once there was a farming town that could be reached only by a narrow road with a bad curve in it. There were frequent accidents on the road, especially at that curve, and the preacher would preach to the people of the town to make sure that they were good samaritans, and so they were. And they would pick up people on the road, for this was a religious deed and a religious work. One day, someone suggested that they buy an ambulance and get the accident victims to the hospital town more quickly. The preacher preached this and the people did it, for this was a religious deed and a religious work. Then, one day, a councilman suggested that the town authorize building a wider road and taking out the dangerous curve entirely. Now, it happened that the mayor had a farm market right on the curve, and he was against taking it out. Someone asked the preacher to say a word to the mayor and the congregation next Sunday about it. But the preacher and most of the people figured they had better "stay out of politics!" So, next Sunday, the preacher preached on the Good Samaritan and encouraged the people to keep up their fine work of picking up the accident victims, who kept multiplying, which is exactly what they did and are still doing today.

May we work together in finding effective ways to follow Jesus Who was a carpenter, and more than a carpenter. Amen.

