

"The Clown and the Cross"

Homily of September 1, 2002 (on Matthew 16, 21-27)

by Fr. Brian Joyce

This morning, our 9:15 a.m. Mass was hosted by our Youth Ministry and by our Clown Ministry that goes to convalescent homes and hospitals throughout the year.

Historically, the most important name among professional clowns is "Joseph Grimaldi." Early in the nineteenth century, he set the standard and pattern for all circus clowns that would follow for the next one hundred fifty years. On one occasion, the circus was visiting a small English town, and the local doctor came up with a novel remedy. A patient came to him with severe depression. In fact, the doctor later reported that the pain and the despair was so deep that the man could barely hold up his head and kept looking down the whole time. The doctor decided on a different kind of prescription. He said to the man, "The circus is in town. I want you to go tonight, but what I want you to do is watch Grimaldi. I went last night and his performance was terrific. He will make you laugh. He will make you smile. He will lift your spirits. You go tonight, but just keep watching Grimaldi." The man painfully, and slowly raised his head and said, "But, Doctor, I'm Grimaldi."

Now, that true story connects, with me, with today's gospel where Jesus says, "Take up your cross," because Christians believe and they pray and they sing "It's a cross of joy. It's a cross of resurrection. It's a cross of hope. It's a cross of victory." Yet, every once in awhile, we painfully and slowly raise our heads and admit, "....But.... it's.... still.... a.... cross!"

Usually, when we think about crosses, we are thinking about our own personal hardships, our upsets, our difficulties. We are thinking about our headaches and our heartaches and our disappointments. And our response is to bear with our cross, to put up with our cross. But, I don't think that is what Jesus is talking about. Jesus uses a different kind of language, much more active than that. Jesus says, "Take up your cross." He doesn't say, "Put up with it." He says, "Take it up." And, I think that language suggests that what Jesus is talking about is not passive suffering of our own difficulties, but taking responsibility and responding to the hurt and pain we see in the world around us, to taking up the cross of our society and the cross of our planet.

Take Labor Day and its issues: security of working people, concern for the unemployed, adequate health care, welfare reform, fair treatment of immigrants (You know, people like my parents and your grandparents), secure retirement, fair wages. (I suppose even for baseball players!) For most of the last century, the biggest single concrete response to those crosses, those needs, was the union movement. In fact, the union movement gave us Labor Day, that we celebrate tomorrow. However, both

because of the many victories of unions and some abuses, because of prosperity and different needs, people disagree today on the exact place of unions. But the issues of security and justice remain the cross that we must all be willing to pick up when we see it.

Another cross is the safety and security of our whole planet. Now this is very hard to get ahold of. You know, it's hard to even notice it. It can be hard for us to watch global issues. For example, you turn on TV and you get a glimpse of maybe even millions of children starving on another continent. Or you get a glimpse of innocent victims crippled by land mines and instruments of war. But just a glimpse, because mainly we've got large commercials for Burger King and for Celebrex and for Prozac, shielding us from thinking about that. It's hard to remember it.

Two weeks ago, Sister Carol Zihn was here from the United Nations, and she gave us some striking reminders. For example, she told us that in the continent of Africa, four out of five people, four out of five, have no access to drinkable water. She told us, and this is striking (It almost makes you smile!), two out of three people on our planet have never used a telephone. I think that means all the cell phones are in our automobiles, our restaurants, our theatres, and our churches. I think that's what that means. But it is very hard to get our minds around six billion people, the six billion brothers and sisters of ours on this planet.

She made it a little easier to picture by taking a compressed view. What if all those six billion people were represented today, and their lives today, by a single village of one hundred people? That gave us a good clear instant photo. She said that, of those hundred people, seventy cannot read or write. Of those hundred people, eighty are undernourished, undereducated, underhoused, and underfed. Of those one hundred people, one (one!) would have a college degree. And 87% of all the wealth of our planet would be possessed by six people in that village, and all six would be United States citizens. And that is not to mention our planet's creatures, its resources and its life forms. One thing she said was very striking to me, and that was, "If human life disappeared tomorrow, if the human race disappeared tomorrow, every other species on the planet would benefit eightfold, except for our house plants and our pets. They've been domesticated and it would take them a couple of generations, but they would come back and they would be OK. What does this mean for us to take up that cross?"

Here's where we might possibly begin. Number one, is just to notice. It's much easier to look away. It's much easier to ignore and remain ignorant of hurt that goes on around us. So, number one is to be a people who notice, who are willing to get the facts about hurt in our world.

Number two is to let that knowledge, what we notice, make some change in our

thinking and some change in our conversation.

And number three is, finally, to bring to one another a steadfast hope, because we believe in the victory of the cross. We believe in resurrection over death. Remember the saying I shared with you a couple of weeks ago, "There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still.... There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still." So, we want to be a people who don't look away, but also who don't give up. We may remain a people of compassion and of hope, who steadfastly refuse to settle for desperate solutions or the violence of despair.

Joseph Grimaldi died in 1837. Charles Dickens wrote his biography. His clown makeup, which was white face, bright red lips and red triangles around the eyes, and his clown routine became the standard for clowns all around the world for over a hundred years. And the name he used for his clown, "Joey," to this day is the circus nickname for clowns. They are called the "Joeys." Making a pun of his depression and of his own name, Grimaldi once said, "I'm Grim all day, but at night I'm Joey."

But Christians are not called to be grim, even in the face of tragedy and painful situations. But we are called to be a people who notice and lift up the cross of hurt whenever we can. But, because we know Christ has triumphed over death and has the ultimate victory, and because we know Jesus shows us a God Who companions us no matter what is going on, we do it with joyful confidence and with steadfast hope.

Let us give thanks to the Lord Who is so good. Amen.