

"Promises"

Homily of October 13, 2002

by Fr. Michael Dibble

The Gospel today is so much like the past two Sundays (and you and I are, by the way, the guests, good and bad alike who have been invited to feast), but I'd rather think today about something we heard a minute before the Gospel - the letter that Paul wrote to the Philippians. Because it's as if Paul gathered all the promises that Jesus ever made, and he put them into one sentence. Paul's Letter to the Philippians that we heard a minute ago.

Now sometimes when I'm sitting over there, and the lector (and you've got good lectors here, who take their time) starts the letter from St. Paul, a kind of glaze seems to settle over the eyes of the people because St. Paul is so cerebral and so compact, that he's often difficult. But today, he's beautifully simple. I grabbed my three Catholic scholarly Bible books and looked up what the scholars said, and they said that St. Paul wrote this letter when he was in the slammer. He was in jail! And he loved the Philippians; evidently they were very affectionate, teachable people - he loved them. And it's one of the shortest letters and it's full of simple affection. And evidently, they just sent him some money (not enough for bail, evidently!) but they had sent him some money. And he writes this letter not from some academic, ethereal cloud, he writes the letter from jail! And it's full of affection! And he gathers the promises into one sentence. He says, "God will fully supply whatever you need from the riches of Christ." Now the end of that sentence, when I used to teach high school kids, when I got to the end of the sentence (you know how ingenuous kids are - how open!), "Oh yeah, from the riches of Christ - that's spiritual stuff! First part sounds good; He'll supply whatever I need! From the riches of Christ - that's spiritual stuff!" You bet. You bet it's spiritual stuff. And he's writing it from jail, he's not writing it from some academic post.

I want to read you a little doggerel, I can't dignify it by the name poetry, it's doggerel. But a former student of mine who just got out of jail (which will surprise few of you!), he had two years in jail. He didn't hurt anyone physically or financially, but he did commit a crime (two years in jail). This is kind of a re-writing of a doggerel he wrote:

"Lord I read the daily papers and could despair and weep, until I remember all the promises you keep."

And then in his letter, he underlined "peace." Christ promises peace. He found peace in the slammer! And some of you at this Mass, a crowd this large, some of you must have only discovered some of the stuff Jesus promised in pain - only in pain or loss, "Oh that's what Christ was talking about!" It's not just pie in the sky; it's solid spiritual peace. He found it in jail.

OK, but let's get back to promises themselves. Our Lord is not ashamed to bribe us, to promise us reward - he's not embarrassed! I was once at a party (I love dropping names! But I was once at a party at NYU), and we were all getting our little degrees. But some of the guests were a little squiffed! I was drinking ginger ale on this occasion. But some of them with their fresh PhD's were getting a little squiffed! And one of them turned to me, and said, "Reverend," (I was fully dressed as a priest), "Reverend, you know, I don't need to be bribed with 'pie-in-the-sky' paradise. I am good because that's what intelligent people do. I have read Marcus Aurelius, and the Protes of Plato, and good morality is what intelligent people do. I don't need 'heaven'." And I thought, "I do!" I do - I'm glad our Lord gives us promises and rewards. I'm glad that there's paradise and life after death. And I think Jesus, knowing human nature, makes that promise and it's not bogus; it comes from His mouth. It's true. And Paul puts it all together in that one sentence.

Now there are all kinds of promises that you and I make - human being promises. Whole bunch of them, but let's just take three. Loose, flexible, potential promises. Conditional promises, for example. When I was a kid, I went to the dentist (I'm talking the '40s), and the dentist said, "I don't think this will hurt a bit, I promise." My shriek shook the instruments off his tray! But he said, you know, "Shouldn't hurt." Provisional! And at FAO Schwartz in New York City, the little kid said (this was '97), "Do I get the bicycle for Christmas?" And his mother leaned past her sables and said, "We'll see." "Do you promise?" "I promise that we'll see." That's good! It's honest, it's provisional promise - "we will see." Parents can say that without being bogus.

Then there's the impulse promise - on impulse, right off the bat. Usually out of good nature and good hearts. Every so often people in this parish draw the short straw and have to drive me somewhere, and a man who drew the short straw this week was driving me to Walnut Creek, and on the way he said, "When I get there I want to go into that store and buy a lottery ticket. And if I win, Father, you get half!" I said, "Well, thank you." (Laughter!) And on the way back, driving to Safeway, he said, "Father, you know what I said about the lottery, you know I'm kidding?" I said (silly voice), "Yes, I know you're kidding." (Laughter!) Impulse - good hearted! We all do it all the time!

One more anecdote, you've got to be patient with my "I-I-I, this happened to me stuff." In 1961 a young mother and two of her four boys came to New York to an ordination on the East Coast, in New York. And she met me, and she said, "I hear that you have a relative in California." That's where they were from. And I said, "Yes, my brother lives in Santa Monica." And this young mother said, "Whenever you visit your brother," and I said, "I visit him every summer." She said, "Whenever you visit your brother in Santa Monica, come north and come to our house in Berkeley. I promise you a warm welcome!" Well, I did. Year after year after year after ... "Hi, I'm here! You lucky lady,

you can keep your promise!" Year after year! And then about six or seven years ago one of her sons had grown up and he became a doctor and he said to me, "When you retire you can live on my property for free," and in the month of May in 1999 I arrived, "Hi! (Laughter!) You lucky man, you can keep your promise!" Year after year! Sometimes an impulse can result in great riches.

And then there's the empty promise, and this is where we can get into the area of real hurt and pain, especially if it's deliberate, deliberately calculated. And it's kind of sad if you go to visit old folks, which priests often have to do, old folks homes, and they will show (old gentleman and elderly ladies) a postcard or a Christmas card, or a letter from Hawaii, with "We will drop in and see you as soon as we get back!" Or, "We'll certainly see you before the New Year!" And you look at the date; they're two or three years old. And the elderly will often apologize, "Well, they're awfully busy, they promised they'd visit but they're very busy." Don't - you and I mustn't, you know - if it's empty and you know when you write it you don't mean it.

And as for going on dates (which I haven't done since the Carthaginian Wars), but when you're going on dates (and I think it's still the guy that does this more than the young lady), but you know, if, let's say I taught in a girl's college for several years. Let me give you an example. I wish I could tell you that the girls came to the priest to discuss the intricate details of the mystery of the Trinity, or the possible ambulations of the term "transubstantiation," but no! "I want to talk about this boy I'm crazy about!" "OK, sit down ..." And, you know I'm making a cartoon, but I'm talking after many years, this is a capsule digest.

"You know they boy I introduced you to at the dance on the campus two weeks ago?"

"Yes, I remember. Delbert Deltoids from Dartmouth, I remember."

"Well, we had a wonderful time at the dance, and he walked me back to the dorm on the campus and he said, as he piled into his Porsche, 'I'll call you,' and I said, 'You promise?' And he said, 'Yeah, I'll call you!'"

Now you may say, "Well, that's just conventional date lingo," but I've known too many people of both sexes who really wait for the call. "Well, what else are you going to say to be tactful at the end of the date?" Don't tell a false promise! I have several suggestions, which I will offer for a small fee. (Laughter!) Too many people still carry scars about waiting for a phone to ring, and facile empty promises. "Yeah, I'll call, I'll call." "I'll visit!"

And please forgive this last example of an empty promise - forgive it because you've heard it before. We had not too many baptisms at the Wall Street parish, which was my

last parish before I came here. We had very few baptisms because it wasn't a family parish, but now and then we did. And there was this one baptism, the last one I had in New York City on Wall Street, and the godmother was this gorgeous woman model - I mean, she shimmered in on a cloud of Chanel No 5, she tossed her hair - I hated her. Good-looking people! Supposed to be an intelligent priest! (Laughter!)

Anyhow, she was holding the baby and I thought, "I bet she was just asked because she is rich or famous or something!" But you remember how we renew our promises on Easter - renewal of baptismal promises? "Do you accept the teaching of Church on the resurrection and the body and the forgiveness of sins? And do you reject Satan?" And the people, the grownups answering for the baby say, "We do." "And all Satan's empty promises?" "We do." Well this young lady, after we said, "We do," she said it again, holding the baby. She said it in like a stage whisper that covered the whole church on Wall Street - "We reject his empty promises." All by herself she repeated it, and I remember thinking, "I forgive you for being so beautiful." (Laughter!) Because she had lived that and she knew it to be true.

Now about our Lord's promises, they're from the mouth of the Son of God. Jesus Christ, the whole reason we're here listening to me babbling away, all this is because of Christ, not just man, but God. And He makes promises and He keeps them. In fact, when the man who warned me that the lottery was merely an impulse promise, when we got to Safeway, I went scuttling around to get stuff. And every so often if I recognize one of you as a parishioner, I will grab you and talk, and now people are starting to duck behind counters and things! Because I'll do things like this (which I did this week) - I said, "I'm going to talk this Sunday about promises. I'm going to say a word; will you please answer the first word that occurs to you?" And they looked at each other and sighed, and I said, "The word is 'promise'." And the man said, "Um, keep." And the woman said, "True." And I thought, "That's it. That's the homily. Christ is true and He keeps his promises." He does, and He's made many of them.

Another thing, before we get to our Lord, something that may help you (it's helped me) about promises. It's a very spiritual sentence. It's not the same thing when you make a promise and then you simply cannot keep the promise, that's not the same as making a promise and coolly and deliberately breaking it. Not being able to keep a promise is not the same as deliberately breaking one. That's a very good moral code.

Now our Lord has made so many to us, and there's another acronym but it's a nice short one. P-A-L. It's an acronym I remember because it's my three favorite promises from the mouth of our Lord. "P" - peace, "A" - always, and "L" - live.

OK. The first of many promises that I like, the "P" of PAL, is "Peace I leave you." He says to the Apostles, and he says it to her, and him, and the servers and Fr. Timoney.

Personally, he's saying it - not to some basilica in Rome. To you, this afternoon - "peace I leave you, my peace I give you. Not as the world gives peace do I give you peace, but my own peace I give you." OK. Now that guy who just got out of jail after two years only discovered what that meant in jail! That he felt with all the noise (evidently, that's one of the horrors of jail, the constant noise and the lack of privacy), but he found the peace! And I guess some of us only discover ("Oh it's only that spiritual stuff!") how absolutely concrete, wonderful it is only under suffering! The substraighum of peace when your emotions are a roller coaster of pain and fear. And somehow there's something holding the roller coaster of your feelings firmly in place. That's the kind of peace our Lord is talking about.

Now I wish, and I bet you do, that He was talking about International peace. But He doesn't say that, He's talking about the individual heart. Now this is just personal, but I don't know how many more millennia we will have to live through before we Christians really accept what Christ said about peace. The night He's arrested, remember? And the guards grab our Lord in the garden and St. Peter whips out the sword and he cuts off a bit of the ear of one of the arresters? And the Lord turns to Peter and He says, "Put up your sword. He who takes up the sword will perish by the sword. Put it away." "Well, you know Jesus didn't really know the modern world!" If our Lord doesn't understand the world, who does? And it may take another two, four thousand years before we let that sink in instead of patting little Jesus on the head, you know. Anyhow the kind of peace he wants for you and me, we can have here, Sunday, because it's His gift.

The "A" of PAL is "all days, always" - "I'm with you all days." Not, concrete Catholics - you! You! Especially those in pain! "I am with you, all days." Promise of Christ. And that has nothing to do with your feelings. I'm sorry to keep beating this in, but I had to keep beating it into me. It has nothing to do with your feelings of tension or fear or worry - it's dogged faith. "I'm with you."

And the "L" is "live forever." You're going to live forever! Anybody lose somebody you love this year? "Oh it's that spiritual stuff, live forever!" Not when you go to a wake (that's what we call it on the East Coast; here you call it a vigil), you go to a vigil and you feel the faces, some of the stricken, of people who have died. And you see their relatives. "Oh well, it's just spiritual stuff, you're going to live forever." You bet it's spiritual. Face to face, the resurrection of somebody you love as Christ was risen on Easter Sunday. Not a globule, not a nice memory, He! Himself! "Have you got anything to eat?" he says, "I'm not a ghost!" That's promise to us, and the people we loved who are gone. PAL.

I'm almost finished, but I'd like to suggest three promises that you could make to yourself. "My promise to me" - pick any one of the three, just for this week. Number 1: you'll make, starting tomorrow, a mini-meditation. Don't be scared of the word "meditation." It does not mean levitation, or sulfur coming out of your ears. A mini-

meditation, something like this: you're tying your shoes or packing up to go to work (when I used to talk to students about meditation I'd be waving books at them! No!), just take something simple like, "Daily bread, give us this day our daily bread." When you're tying your shoes or starting up the car or whatever. Daily bread - that doesn't just mean toast. It means daily courage. Patience. "Lord, help me not to freak out on the freeway. Help me not to conk the cranium of that creep at work who has the IQ of a pancake. Help me to keep patient!" Daily bread! St. Theresa of Avila says that's high contemplation, that little prayer. Deep faith, high contemplation!

The second suggestion of a promise you might make to yourself is, would you call on the phone or email, or just drop a card to somebody who would love to hear from you? "Well, I don't have time to write a letter!" No, I'm not saying a letter - a card! Just thinking of you, a phone call - "Hi! I thought of you today!" You have no idea how people treasure things like that, especially people who are advanced in years.

And the third suggested promise is keep one of the two that were just listed! (Laughter!)

Anyhow, some of us are greatly heartened by the promises from the mouth of Christ, including the guy who wrote in the slammer: "Lord I read the daily papers and could despair and weep, until I remember all the promises you keep."