

"Lift the Burden"
Homily of November 3, 2002
by Fr. Michael Dibble

Words...words...words....
I am so sick of words.
I get words all day through,
First from them , now from you.
Is that all you people can do?

That's a song from an old musical show called "My Fair Lady." And in that show a young woman has been taking class after class after class for months, learning words, learning language. And she steps out for a little recess for a minute, and this guy, who she thinks likes her, comes up to her and he starts making speeches. She explodes,

"Words....words....words.
I get words all day through,
First from them , now from you.
Is that all you people can do?"

And that's, in a way, what Our Lord is talking about today, about some of those Scribes and Pharisees. Words.... words.... words. Listen to their words because their words come from the Torah, what we call the Old Testament, from the Bible. Listen to the words they give you but don't follow their example. They won't lift a finger to help on any heavy burdens you've got. They won't lift a finger.

Now, I won't inflict my habit of acronyms on you today. But, instead of acronyms about lifting a finger to help the burden that Our Lord said those clowns didn't do, instead of an acronym, three words that rhyme. Lift the burden of TIME. Lift the burden of the DIME. (By the "dime" I mean money.) And lift the burden of GRIME. [By "grime" I mean up here (pointing to his head), hurts and resentments and bitterness.]

Lord, just for today's Mass, the last Mass of this particular day in November, for the next forty or forty-five minutes would you just lift...You could do it, Lord! The Pharisees and Scribes weren't doing it but you could lift the burden for a little while! TIME.... I don't have enough time to do what I've got to do. The DIME.... How am I going to pay these bills? And the GRIME.... the things that invade my mind, especially at church sometimes, heartaches and old pains and old bitterness.... Just lift.... You can do it, Lord.

Now, speaking of TIME, time and the dime and grime.... time first. Speaking of time, it is up to me to take a little time, when I know we are going to be together on Sunday, to look up in the Bible scholars, the Catholic Bible scholars, what they say about today's gospel. And we know more now than we ever did, about the meaning of words and what was going on when Our Lord said the words. And when Our Lord says, "Don't pay attention to these Scribes and Pharisees" He is not talking about all of them. Many of the Scribes and Pharisees were very conscientious, good guys. In fact, we read that a good number of them became followers of Christ after the Resurrection. He is talking about some of these (Forgive my colloquialism.) but some of these "jerks" who cared only about the honors accruing to them. And some of them were really bad guys. I mean in another gospel, Our Lord said that some of the Scribes and Pharisees would say to people whose parents were getting old and sick, "The money you are setting aside to take care of your old parents, no, it's not for them. You give it to us so we can improve the temple." And they put it in their own little pockets.

Another thing Our Lord is talking about, "Don't call anybody 'Rabbi' or 'Father' or 'Master.' " Now, "Rabbi" means, in Our Lord's language, "My great one." And it was merely meant because the Rabbi was meant to remind the Jewish people of God, of the Father. But some of these characters decided it meant them. And, according to the scholars I checked out this week in the scholarly studies, when you said, "Hail, Rabbi," if you met one of these guys walking down the street, you had to say it this way (making a deep bow), "Hail Rabbi!" And some of those guys took it seriously, not representing God, but representing me!

Now, the same goes for "Father." I remember once (I love dropping names!) when I was studying at NYU, there was a little cocktail party for some that were studying and they said, "Aren't you a priest?" And I said, "Well, yes. What do you think I am wearing this for?"

"Well, Reverend, we have read our Bible, and Jesus Himself said, 'Call no man on earth Father.'" I said, "Well, yeah." But even then I knew that when you said the word "Father" in Our Lord's day, you said, "FAH-H-THER-R-R." I said, "Nobody does that to me!" And then I had the wit to say (which is rare!), "Don't you call some people 'Professor' or 'Doctor'?".... "Well, yes!".... I said, "That's all Catholics do now when they call priests 'Father.' Nobody is scraping the floor with the chin, doing an obeisance to us. Our Lord was trying to make a point. That's all. All these guys wanted was honors and the best seats and 'Oh! My great one!' "

Another thing about TIME.... Thomas Aquinas, a great theologian, one of maybe our three or four best brains in the history of western Christendom, way back in the thirteenth century, in one of his essays, he is talking about time. (Now, bear with me. I am going to kind of rush many pages in very briefly.) Aquinas is talking about, he says, three times in a normal human being's life, three basic parameters, youth, middle age

(adulthood) and old age. Aquinas says (I'm really boiling this down.) the great temptation or trouble, morally, for youth is lust. And the great temptation for adults is greed, not money, but greed.... more, more, more. He felt, way back then, that the great trouble as we get old is resentment. "How could she say that to me in 1948?" And, "Nobody loves me now that I am old," and all the things that can haunt and hurt us as we get old.

Now I know that some of you are thinking, as I did when I studied this stuff, "Come on. All the temptations overlap, all through the years. You can't neatly docket them that way." And Aquinas knew that. He is just trying to make a certain generic point. I mean there could be somebody sitting way in the back of some church, "I'm 92 years old and I am a volcano of lust." To which we would say, "Oh, oh, well, congratulations and.... Don't be discouraged. Try a few distractions like, like scuba diving or climbing mountains."

And then Aquinas goes on and he talks about being at "Liturgica," at Mass, and that Our Lord in the gospel, Sunday after Sunday, all the years in your life, He addresses difficulties that happen in those three stages, of being young, and then getting older, and finally reaching codger-dom. If you just listen, even with half an ear, Christ has words to lift the burden of those temptations that come with time.

Again, this is repeat stuff. But so often, I would hear kids, on Monday morning, in high school or college class, say, "I went to Mass yesterday, Father, and it was a waste of time. I got nothing out of it." You'd hear it not from all the kids, but enough. It's not a waste of time. Aquinas, way back in the thirteenth century, says, (And I have to put it in modern language.) "Even when you are sitting at Liturgica, Mass, (Our modern word would be "subliminally.") at an unconscious level, you are getting spiritual riches. You are getting spiritual goodies, nutrition.... just the presence of other believers, just whatever level of belief you have (which you should have) in the Real Presence of Christ in that tabernacle. Just half hearing gospels, Sunday after Sunday, just the cross "I didn't even notice the cross this Sunday." "Oh, yes, you did!" said St. Thomas Aquinas. There is great spiritual energy. And you will walk out of Mass and say, "That blowhard talked too long as usual and I didn't like the music and I didn't like the new decorations..." It doesn't matter. And Thomas even uses the word that we could call "alchemy." It is like a great power, spiritual magic, that happens in a Mass. And it has nothing to do with how you feel as you walk out. Christ is here. And I have studied some of these modern psychologists. They say exactly the same thing. A group like this, united in the spirit, you are not wasting time. Even subliminally, you are getting riches, and don't identify that with emotion.

The second thing is the DIME. Would you lift the burden of the dime, money, paying the bills, meeting the mor..... Now that I am retired, I no longer live in a monastery or a faculty house. I go shopping by myself and it is a learning experience. Most of my

shopping is for my terrier, and when I see the price of kibbles has gone up I need a tranquilizer the size of a volleyball. And I look at some of you whom I see, at Safeway let's say, and you've got kids and a mortgage and rent. You have to support a car, and dental bills.... Our Lord's not talking, and we are not talking, about lifting the burden of paying bills. We know no phosphorescent hand is going to come down and write a fat check and hand it to you. But the obsession with the money, and I saw a lot of that on that Wall St. job, a lot of it. People with a gezillion bucks and they wanted more and more. You could see it on their faces. They had the briefcases! No wonder Our Lord warns of the danger of obsessing about money. You are not doing that.

Just help me take care of some bills. And when I am at Mass on Sunday, Lord, would you please just lift the burden a little bit from my mind and my heart, just for forty-five minutes? I know you will get me through the day.

The best advice I got about money, of course, was from Christ, but it was through the lips of an old Dominican nun who was dying. I really listen to people who are dying because there is no time for small-talk. And this old Dominican nun said, "Do you know how we are going to be judged?" It was obviously a rhetorical question. And I said, "Well tell me, Sister." And she said, "Well, Jesus told us how we are going to be judged when we are finally confronting God and whether we are going to get to heaven or elsewhere. And Jesus says here's how you are going to be judged, you and me, "When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat. When I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was naked, you gave me some clothes. Come into the Kingdom." She said, "It is really basically so simple, and that takes a couple of dimes, especially when you are kind of short yourself of dimes, to keep doing it as best you can."

I saw a kid once, and this is the end of the dime thing, about lifting the burden, and if we lift a little bit of somebody else's we'll be OK. It was at Lincoln Center. We brought a busload of kids from Poughkeepsie, sixty- mile ride on the bus, to New York to see a matinee at Lincoln Center, a concert, a symphony, whole bunch of seniors, guys and girls. In the center of Lincoln Center there is a big fountain. This was in November, this month. It was cold in New York in November and there was a light drizzle. There was this old bum, big shock of white hair, all rolled up in a cardboard sack at that fountain in Lincoln Center, and his feet were bare. One of the high school senior guys dived into his pocket and he pulled out a wad of bills. I don't know how much. Maybe they were just singles, but he dived in and he put a whole lot of bills into this old drunk bum's paper cup. And, another senior said to him, "Oh, shouldn't do that. He will only use it for drink." And the first senior said, "Oh, I hope so. You know, it's cold. It's cold, and bare feet!"

I know it is a complicated and complex issue, but that old clause about "What would

Jesus do?" I think He would say, "Yeah. Give him a couple of bucks."

Anyhow, we are moving on to GRIME. Now I call the grime in my noggin, "my buzzards," that caw like a mean buzzard with little mean pink eyes and a beak.... Nobody call a psychiatrist! I am talking a metaphor. I am into the codgerdom stage now at my age, and the resentments. I agree with Aquinas. "How come she rejected me for the eighth grade dance in 1948?" and all that stuff. And brooding on it, "Nobody cares whether I live or die." You know, when you get old, you start really thinking of all those things. They are just human troubles, but at Mass, Lord, would You lift them? Would You lift a finger and help me, at least for Mass? And, the way I do with my buzzards, which is what I call them, is "How dare you rent free space in my head?" I am thinking of all the people who have hurt me and I am mad at, and they are living rent-free up here. "(Pointing to his head), "Get out of there!" I know I have told you this before, but it really has helped some of us. When you are thinking of the face with bad memories attached, replace the face. Give yourself a break! Put up there in that apartment of your skull a face that you remember with affection and love, that was good and generous when you didn't expect it, like the senior putting those bucks into the old poor alcoholic's tin cup.... Replace the face.

Another thing that helped me (I get all this stuff from other people.) was an example about "lift the grime from my skull." Try to imagine a TV set, your head, getting older, resenting things. And you are at Mass, and sometimes they are worst at Mass, the fantasies and the resentments. It can be worst in church. Well like the remote control on television, which I finally managed to learn to use, all the little buttons, now at Mass with the Lord's help, you can turn on to shut the buzzards up. (They are flapping and they are cawing.) You can slowly lower the volume. They don't disappear, the buzzards, if any of you know what I am talking about (Some of you must.). We are not going to lose the buzzards completely unless we get a lobotomy, dead drunk, or die. Some of them will stay with us always. Our Lord never said, "Forgive and forget." He said, "Try to forgive." He never said, "Forget." But at Mass, you can lower the volume, and the mute button. You know that. And on my TV set, there is a "Pause." Well, you don't block out the picture completely, but you freeze it. I can still see some of the buzzards, you know, maybe the wing. But they have stopped.

And that's one of the great things about being together at Mass on a Sunday. Just let the Lord lift, by using that remote, so to speak. And, if you can't do anything else, sometimes at Mass, "Oh God, I wish the priest would stop talking. What a blowhard! I don't like the music today. And oh, there is that awful woman in the other pew. I will have to say hello to her, and I can't pray." Just do this (raising one hand, with five fingers extended): You can lift TEN fingers. "Here's my prayer, Lord. It's all I can do today. I'm wiped out, depressed and worried. Here's my prayer. Accept that." I can lift up ten fingers and let that be my eloquent prayer.

Now, about resentment, this really is the end. Speaking of resentments, I have a nice fresh one this week, a nice fresh-as-paint resentment. There was a parish in New York City where I used to help out on weekends on the upper East Side, very posh, the upper 70's in New York, real expensive parish. But the priest there were not posh. They were down-to-earth, very good-hearted, and in the sacristy, they put up signs every so often, that the priest would have to spot as he put on the vestments or took them off. The first thing I spotted was a sign that said, "Do you practice what you preach?" And another one that they put up later said, "If you are still wondering what effect your homily had, you are taking yourself entirely too seriously." Anyhow, one of them still calls me and gives me the latest gossip from the East, East Coast Archdiocese of New York, and he said, "Oh, Mike, we put up a new sign in the sacristy... It's a poem. Would you like to hear it?" I said, "Let me get a pencil..." He said, "Here is the poem that the priest sees as he gets ready for Mass:

Too much talk makes people balk.
The homily crime is when you take too much time.
You are not teaching class.
Get on with the Mass."

And then he said, "We thought of you, Mike!" I said, my tone dropping to a glacial ice cube, "Is that all?" And he said, "No, no. We added 'Amen.' "