

**"Tell Me About It"**  
Homily of February 9, 2003  
by Fr. Michael Dibble

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Last week, I was on BART, the train, and I was coming from Embarcadero to Pleasant Hill, and it was very crowded. It was rush hour, and I was holding that thing (motioning toward an overhead bar), and a young lady was sitting in front of me. After a couple of stops, she looked up and she said, "Oh, can I offer you my seat, Sir?" Now, I was touched, but a little annoyed.... because I thought, "Well, I guess I am sufficiently decayed." But, it was a gracious gesture for her, and I sat there. The gentleman who was sitting on my right had a cell phone. All the way to Pleasant Hill, he was on the cell phone, and he kept repeating the same phrase, which I always notice, the repetition. The phrase he used was, "Yeah! Tell me about it.... TELL me about it!" Sometimes it would be funny and he'd laugh, "Tell me about it." And sometimes it wouldn't and he (somberly) would say, "Tell me about it." And I thought, "Thank you, God. I've got my mantra for the next time we are together at Christ the King on a Sunday."

"Tell me about it!" That kicked up for me a memory from that Gospel refresher course that I took in Menlo Park in '92. It was a great refresher course on theology and the Bible. Our New Testament professor was Father Stuhmueller. He has written a lot of little paperbacks on the daily readings from the Gospel, great, great stuff.... edgy and funny. Father Stuhmueller was going blind when he taught us the course on the gospels in '92, and because he was going blind, it was particularly poignant that he kept emphasizing to us forty priests from all over the world who were taking the course that we should try to help each other and you, and you help us too, when we hear a gospel, to try to get all of our senses going because most of us have heard them since we were little kids. But to get the senses going, Stuhmueller said, the sense of sight and hearing. Try to visualize and get that imagination clicking, even though I've heard this gospel before. I remember writing it down and underlining it. So, I'd like to do that, because what he (Father Stuhmueller) was saying to the five senses was, "Tell me about it. Get me involved." So, what I would like to do this morning, with your help, is to take a scene from Our Lord's life, in the gospels, and use our senses and then something from current events, let's say.

So, the first would be the sense of SIGHT. You are hearing the gospel, you and I, on a Sunday morning. And, today, Our Lord enters a house and he uses his hand. Try to see it, as you see a wonderful movie. A couple of months ago, we had Christmas, the Incarnation. God became a human being. With the hand, you see Him picking up Peter's mother-in-law, getting her up off the bed. Then she serves them something to eat. Then, Our Lord goes to bed and he wakes up in the morning. It was C-O-L-D in that country at that hour. And He stretches, and hurries off to someplace where He can be alone, and we see Him there. And the door to the house where He is hanging out is

packed with people. And He says, "OK. We will keep moving on, from town to town." Seeing Christ, God made a human being, reaching out.

The other thing about SEEING that hit me was about Thomas Merton. I lived, as a kid, in the parish in New York City, which was right next to the Columbia University Campus. Thomas Merton was taking courses there. He would come to our parish, Corpus Christi, on the upper west side, and he would take instructions in the Catholic Faith. And I remember our pastor referring to him as "Tom Merton." I love dropping names... Thomas Merton was this close to baptism, and he had read all the great books and theology and that Christ really lived and all that stuff, but he couldn't take the final step. And he used to come to daily Mass. Even though he wasn't baptised, he would just watch. He saw one day, an elderly woman kneeling. He just saw it. She didn't say anything, but the way she knelt and the avidity of her expression and the way her hands were folded, looking at the priest saying Mass, and the way she received the Eucharist..... Merton got up, knocked at the rectory door, knocked and said, "Now, I have seen faith alive." And he was baptised.

Sense of HEARING... Do you remember the passage in the gospels where Our Lord's enemies send soldiers to observe Jesus, hoping they can catch Him saying something illegal and arrest Him? Roman soldiers, pagans... Remember that the soldiers come back to the Scribes and the Pharisees and they say, "We've never heard a man talk like that man. We've never heard anyone talk like that." They were pagans. Imagine what Our Lord's voice must have been like... the timbre, the inflections, the emphasis, the tenderness meshed with great strength, the incredible voice of Jesus. You and I... Tell me about it!

The other thing about hearing, more contemporary is.... It's kind of personal, but when I was ordained, my best friend in the seminary was stationed only fifteen miles away in Poughkeepsie. And his was a big parish. Mine was in the country. Anyhow, we were ordained about a month. My friend's name is Jim, Father Jim Quinn. He got a phone call, two in the morning, an accident, "We need a priest!" And Jim ran to this place on the highway, and the medics who were bringing the body to the ambulance said, "Father, there is no need for you. He is dead. He's clinically dead." But Jim remembered that, in the seminary, we were taught that the sense of hearing is ostensibly the last to go. So Jimmy clambered into the ambulance and all the way into the hospital in Poughkeepsie he kept whispering into this allegedly deceased man's ear the words Our Lord put into the mouth of the man in his parable about the Pharisee and the Publican. Remember? The Publican is in the back of the.... So Jimmy kept whispering it into the ear of this ostensibly dead man, "Oh, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.... God, be merciful to me, a sinner." over and over and over. And the next morning Jim got a phone call at ten o'clock in the rectory from St. Francis Hospital from the gentleman, the man! He said, "Father, I heard every word you said. Thank you! And the doctors say that, in time, I shall fully recover." And Jimmy called me in Millbrook, and all I

could think was, "Maybe he will leave him a lot of money.... change his will." You know, tell me about it, the simplest thing.

Third is the sense of SMELL. As a junior in high school, seminary high school, we had a great English teacher. This professor, I remember one Monday, put aside what we were doing in English and said, "Did you gentlemen notice the gospel yesterday?" It was a week after Easter. Remember that scene a week after Easter? The apostles have seen Christ once, and now it is a week later, and they go fishing. And, as usual, Peter can't catch a sardine. It's amazing! That was his job. We never hear of him catching a fish on his own. But Our Lord is on the shore. They don't recognize him at first. He says, "Lower your nets." They bring in a whole bunch of fish. I'll never forget our English teacher telling us, Our Lord has prepared a breakfast for these apostles, these men who rejected Him when He was arrested that awful night, all ran away, and now He has gotten breakfast for them. And the way this English teacher described it, I could smell the fish. I could smell whatever fish was indigenous to those waters, and Our Lord making breakfast.

Another sense, a smell more contemporary, was the philosopher George Santayana. Santayana was not a Catholic but he was an aesthete and he loved Catholic iconography. He was a philosopher, and he went to Chartres and Rheims and Notre Dame and all the great Catholic churches, even little chapels like the one that Matisse depicted. He loved them. He was giving a lecture at the Sorbonne, I believe, to these students and he said, "The Catholic Church is so wise to have kept stained glass windows and statues and images of Jesus and Mary and to fill the church with smells." Santayana said that to a philosophy class. "The scents of wax candles and incense permeating a church, the fragrance of incense, the smell of oil at a Baptism...." And some kid in the Sorbonne put up his hand and said, "Oh, well. Catholics need those crutches for their senses. We have a purer religion." Santayana said, "So do I. I need my senses fed because I am a human being, and I pity the people who have rejected Catholic art and music and the sense of smell that I love in Catholic Churches".... George Santayana.

The sense of TASTE.... You could all come up with examples, I think, the sense of taste, from Our Lord's life. My favorite is His first miracle. Remember, He is invited to a wedding, and Our Lady comes to Our Lord, and she says, "They have run out of wine." That was a big deal for a young bride and groom in Our Lord's land. They had saved for years for that one wedding party, and Our Lady spots that they have run out of wine and she goes to Jesus and He goes to the head waiter and He says, "Bring me those pots of water." And He changes them into wine, but, the marvelous thing about Our Lord... Remember what happens? The head waiter goes to the groom after tasting this new wine, the sommelier with this little thing, "You know, most people, they serve the good stuff at the beginning of the bash and then they serve the lousy wine later, when everyone is kind of schnozzled." (This is my version.) "But you, you save the best

wine until now!" I could just see the sommelier smacking his lips with this delicious vin extraordinaire. Even when Christ changes water into wine it tastes perfect!

Now another taste image, for me, was last Sunday, about a half hour before now, just before the 10:45 Mass last Sunday. I was standing back there before the procession and there was a sudden earthquake! There was a cra-a-ck over there! And a lady in the last row turned to me with this radiant, translucent smile. She said, "Is this your first earthquake, Father?" She was being so nice, but all I could taste was terror. I gave up Manhattan for this? And, all the way down in the procession, trying to achieve a certain macho bravado on my face! I was sitting over there where Father Burns is sitting now. Father Joyce gave this beautiful talk on death, and not fearing it. I was absolutely terrified. And I wish I could tell you that, since I thought it might be my last few minutes, and I did, I wish I could say that I thought this, "This is the last time you shall see these wonderful believing Roman Catholics," or "This is the last time I shall get a chance to celebrate Mass." ...But all I could think of was, "I'll never have a jelly donut again!" That's true, true.

And the last is the sense of TOUCH. Remember, in the gospels Our Lord was walking through this big crowd. This is in the days when Our Lord really was very popular. People wanted to see His miracles, and listened to Him, and it's a packed crowd. Our Lord turns, in this mob scene, to His apostles and asks, in the gospel, "Who touched me?" And the apostles barked back at Our Lord. (We mustn't think that the apostles walked around in a haze of awe. They didn't fully realize who this man was yet.) And the apostles snapped back. They were real brats. They said, "How can you ask, in a mob like that, who touched me?" And Jesus said, "Someone touched me. I felt power go out from me." Isn't that fascinating? "Someone touched me. I felt power..." as if he were depleted of a certain spiritual energy. And then the woman who touched him (They just wanted to touch the tassel of His cloak, we read in the gospel.) ...She comes forward, and Our Lord talks with her and heals her. That's why God became a human being... touch! You see hands and face.... and He knows what we are going through.

And the more contemporary version of touch has to do with Jean-Paul Sartre. He was a famous Nobel Prize winner for literature. And he was a French atheist, Communist, ferociously those things, ferociously athiestic. Anyhow, he went to the movies once with his mistress, Simone deBeauvoir, and they were sitting in this Parisian cinema and they were seeing a French version of Flaubert's great novel, Madame Bovary. At the end of the book, and at the end of the movie, Madame Bovary takes poison. She has had a series of adulterous affairs and she is wiped out with despair, and she tries to kill herself, and she is dying, and they send for a priest. And she is penitent. She is completely penitent. They got a young French actor to study with a French priest in the village near the production company. And the scene was shot with the camera static. You just see the action, no moving of the camera. The actor did exactly what a Catholic priest does for the anointing of the sick, the "Last Rites" as we used to say. He dips his

hand in the oil... And deBeauvoir saw Sartre lean forward in the movie. And the priest anoints the eyes, "All the sins you've committed with the sense of seeing, may they be cleansed and washed away. And the sense that you put your ears to and your nostrils and your mouth and your hands, may all those sins you committed with your senses be spiritually wiped away forever." And deBeauvoir said, and Sartre later denied it, but she said he whispered to her, "I wish... I wish I could believe again." He had read all the great, Thomas Aquinas and Augustine, he had read all the great Catholic theology, but seeing the sense of touch in a Catholic sacrament, "Oh, I wish I could believe again."

Anyhow, Father Stuhmueller died about a year after he taught us that great Bible course. His sight was completely gone, I think, by then. But he told us, at the end of his course on the New Testament, (Remember, he is talking to forty guys who are priests from all over the world.)... He said, "Gentlemen, you and I have been saying Mass for thirty, forty years." It even transcended words, the great mystery, "Take and eat. This is My Body," the words of consecration. Now, repetition might be the mother of studies, as we are taught, but repetition can be the father of boredom, do it by rote, and routine. He said, "Try to make the Mass as vivid as you can, tired as you may be. And make the gospels alive by the use of the senses." So, Father is dead, but I want to honor him now, Father Stuhmueller. Thanks for telling us about it!