

## **"Whose Side Is God On?"**

Homily of March 30, 2003

by Al Garrotto

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It's been quite a week, hasn't it? I don't know about you, but I've been alternately working and glued to the television set, watching the events of the past ten days unfold. The image that keeps coming back to me as I try to make sense of it all is the image of the sandstorm. We saw those storms sweep across the desert of Iraq, and everything became enveloped in sand, and even a large tank could hardly be seen a few feet away. A sandstorm – a good symbol of some of the confusion that we experience right now as we try to deal with the conflict between our nation and the coalition forces and the country of Iraq.

I have to admit to a guilty fascination with watching all the frontline reports and charts and hardware and all that stuff. I grew up in the Second World War. I was a child in the Second World War, very young child, and every day I would watch the maps in the newspaper as the Allies landed in Normandy and worked their way across France. So, that is sort of ingrained in me, to do that.

A lot of strong passions are aroused by this war, obviously. And I would dare say that our parish is divided, and that means that this congregation is probably strongly divided on certain issues. I'd like to approach one question about the war today and see if we can search history and the Scriptures to come to some kind of an answer to a hard question. The question of the week is: Whose side is God on? It is confusing because everyone claims that God is on their side. We see television reports from Saddam Hussein himself, saying "God is on our side. We will prevail because God is on our side." The pro-war activists on our streets are saying, "We must do this because God is on our side, and this is what God wants." And, then, down the street, perhaps, the anti-war activists are saying, "God does not want this war." So, the question really, for us today, is, "Whose side is God on?"

I'd like to begin with a look back in history to the eleventh century. Pope Urban II called upon the kings and nobles and even the peasants of Europe to go to the Holy Land and reclaim the land that Jesus walked on for the Christian Faith. It was inhabited by Muslims. And Pope Urban II said, "We have to take that back. That is Christian land." And he roused up the passions of Europe with the cry, "God wills it!" That became the motto of the Crusades, and over the next two centuries, there were at least, I believe the number is, eight Crusades, Christians from Europe going to the Holy Land and fighting Muslims to gain back the land that Jesus walked on.

Now, there is one story of a Crusade, and I tried, this week, to find the exact reference to it, and I wasn't able to. I remember reading in the past, of one group of Crusaders, an

army who set out from Europe. They arrived at the shores fo the Holy Land and they were so pumped to take back the land for Jesus that, when they got off of the boat, they killed every dark-skinned person they could find in front of them. And then, all of a sudden, somebody said, "Oops! These were dark-skinned Christians that we just killed...."

So, the question remains: "Whose side is God on?" The gospel today is the gospel of the healing of the blind man. And unfortunately, this gospel isn't much help to us in answering that question, because we have the same kind of issues involved. The Pharisees are saying, "We are strict upholders of the law and God is in the law. Therefor, God is on our side." And they looked at Jesus and said, "God cannot be in Jesus because He does not always uphold the law. He healed this blind man on the Sabbath." That automatically meant that Jesus was not "of God." When they asked the formerly-blind man what he thought, he was kind of confused too. He didn't really know who it was who had performed this miracle for him. And so, he said, "I don't know." But he used his own brain to figure it out. He said, "If I was blind and now I can see, I have got to think that that was God working." And the Pharisees said, "Well, what do you know? You are just a blind beggar and we can't listen to you."

So, whose side is God on? In contemplating this homily during this past week... And I have to admit, I wrote a different homily every day this past week. I would write a homily in the morning and then I would watch CNN. Then I would go back and write another homily the next day, and watch CNN. And that went on.... Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. And finally I said, "I am running out of days." So, whose side is God on? I found, for me anyhow, the answer in the fifteenth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel, the parable of the Prodigal Son. But it is really the Parable of the Loving Father. We are familiar with this....

This man had two sons. The younger son, kind of a good-for-nothing, smart-alec, takes his share of the inheritance, goes off into a foreign land, lives high-on-the-hog until he finds out he ran out of money. And then he is not living high-on-the-hog. He is living with the hogs. So, he wakes up one morning, and says, "I am living in the pig sty. The hired hands on my father's ranch are living better than I am. I am going to go home." So, he goes back to his father and apologizes for his stupidity.

The father had another son, the older son. The older son had been faithful and good all of his life, the typical "good boy." But he had one flaw. He was absolutely unforgiving of his younger brother. And so, here is this father with two sons, and what is he going to do? Well, obviously, the father loves both of these young men equally and dearly. The father is not going to choose between the two of them. As Jesus tells the story, the father does everything he possibly can to get these two young men reconciled. You know how it is, as parents yourselves. I sure do. I have two daughters, not two sons. But

oftentimes, they are bickering or battling, and you try to... "Let's settle this thing. I love you both with all my heart. I am not going to take sides, but we've got to work something out here."

So, in the current confusion, whose side is God on? Now, what I am going to share with you is "The Gospel according to Al." So, if you don't like what I say, don't attack Father Mike. He is innocent. Don't attack Brian or Gerry, and don't try to find Brian Joyce, wherever he is, like.... Where's Waldo? Don't send e-mails to "General Delivery, Caribbean," or something. Just come after me. As I see it, God is alive and present to every human being on this earth. He loves every one of us equally, which means that God is as much present to Saddam Hussein as God is present to President Bush, that God is as much present to the Iraqi soldiers as He is to our soldiers, that God is as present to the Iraqi people as God is to you and to me, that God is present as much to sinners as to saints, because God loves all of us equally.

It's OK then, to be confused about a lot of things about this war and the whole situation. It's OK to be on different sides if that's where our conscience takes us. But, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we cannot be confused about whose side God is on, or whom God loves more.... them or us.