

What Are You Going To Do?

Homily of April 13, 2003

by Fr. Michael Dibble

A friend of mine back East has developed on the telephone a habit of saying, "What are you going to do? What are you going to do?" You and I have just begun Holy Week. Holy Week - it's a week that's filled replete with doubt, fear, and pain. Doubt, fear, and pain runs through Holy Week. What are you gonna do, it's Holy Week? So we follow Christ through doubt, fear and pain. And in a congregation of this size on a Palm Sunday there have got to be some who are going through it today - doubt, or fear, or pain about something. But at some level you've made a decision to follow Christ, or you wouldn't be here! I mean, the sun is coming out, it's Sunday, but here you are. At some level, we'll go with Christ. We'll take up the cross and follow him. Either that, or it's chaos. Anybody here at Mass, except maybe very little kids, has been (maybe for some of you, several times in your life) through such a period of doubt, or fear, or pain that you've had to make a decision. I mean, past the level of a pancake, the mind has to decide - either it's chaos and we're just bits of molecule tossed about in some cosmic sick joke (there's no God, and we just try to get through it as best we can, I mean, when you're suffering), or Christ! I've never personally been able to understand any kind of in-between. Ho-hum - doesn't matter. Got to - it's Christ who is God; take up the cross and you will live forever. It's not wasted pain. I'm going through it; You'll go through it with me. It's not wasted - you're going to live forever. Or, it's chaos. They're both honest, and you've decided, just being here, listening to me babbling away. You're here today - you'll go with Christ. Right through Holy Week.

In the Gospel today, there are three characters I'd like to think about with you - three characters, two thousand years ago. And then, three similar characters today. And the first character in today's Gospel I'd like to think about with you is one of the disciples. It says the Lord sent two (He always sent two, but let's just take one of them). And he makes a decision to obey. Our Lord says, "Get that donkey, that colt" (I'm so glad they changed the old translation!). Colt, donkey, mule - St. Francis of Assisi, his favorite word for us was jackass! "Go in that little village, get the jackass, untie it and bring it back." Now, our Lord's disciples as you know didn't always understand Him. Most, right up to his death, didn't understand a lot. But they loved him. They loved him. And they trusted him. OK, what are you going to do? "He wants us to get the jackass, we'll obey! We'll obey. Don't understand always, but I love him, I trust him, I'll obey him." What are you going to do?

Now the modern person I'd like to think about with you, she died a few years back. She was a Dominican nun. Very, very old - very sick. Before she became a nun, she got her PhD at a prestigious Ivy League university in philosophy. A doctorate in philosophy - she went from Plato right up to Sartre. She knew her philosophy, and she was sitting

with these other Dominican nuns beginning of Holy Week, a retreat. Now at this particular convent, the seats for the people (for the nuns) were arranged sideways - so you'd be looking at each other, and then to hear the priest giving the retreat, you'd turn and face him. And they got the same priest, year after year, a Jesuit (who told me this story.) And they got the same Jesuit who gave, year after year, the same retreat! And he began with exactly the same words - "My dear sisters, our dear blessed Lord has told us that pain is a mystery...." And with mystery the aged nun (who got the doctorate when she was in college), got up (she had a cane - she was in terrible physical pain. She really was. She said every bone ached), but she got up and she came down the steps of the side, stumping with the cane and she walked down the main aisle. And she said in a voice that carried several miles, "Here we go again! 'Our dear blessed Lord!' Same old thing again!" But she didn't say, "thing," I'm sorry - she didn't! (Laughter!) Her Ivy League education had given her a more vivid vocabulary! And the next day the Jesuit went to see her (she was in the hospital by this time), and she apologized to him. She was in a lot of pain. And she told him that because she'd been in college, studied all the Philosophers; she made a decision in college, either one or the other. When you are fighting with doubt, fear, or in her case terrific physiological pain, you make a decision. And she said that they ended up the course with Sartre, she said, "I'd go with Sartre, that's a choice." Jean Paul Sartre (we've talked about him once or twice), he was a famous French communist, atheist philosopher - and he was no mean intellect, he had a Nobel Prize. But he would say, to students at the Sorbonne (college kids), he would say to them, "There is no God, you'll all part of some sick cosmic joke, and if the pain, doubt or fear gets too intense, climb into a very hot tub of water, take a sharp instrument, and under the hot water you won't even feel the naked edge, and end it!" And then he added a (unintelligible), the French atheist, he said, "You may want to continue if you're one of three criteria: if you are very beautiful or handsome, if you are very rich, or exercise great power. If you have neither of these three, and the pain gets too bad, then finish the sick joke with the naked edge." Now this nun is telling this Jesuit, "That's a choice! I chose in college to follow Christ. I don't always understand Him, but when He says, 'Take up the cross,' I obey. Not a sick joke. He lives, I will live forever, what are you gonna do?"

The second was one of the bystanders in the Gospels. The bystanders in the village - "What are you guys doing untying that donkey?" And the answer comes back, "The master needs it, and when we're finished we'll bring it right back." And the bystander says, "OK." At least the bystander asks! He asks a question. He gets a decent answer. Oh. OK. What are you gonna do? Ask - pain, fear, and doubt - we're past the level of the pancake and frozen pizza - we're rational creatures. We ask.

Modern example. A Jewish guy at Columbia University - his final semester in college. This Jewish young man was taking a course in great literary genres. And one of the things he had to study to get his degree in literature was to read the four Gospels as an example of Middle Eastern, wonderful breakthrough literature. Jewish guy. He went to

see the Catholic chaplain on campus at the Newman Center (that's a center that Catholics hang out at campuses). And he went to see the priest, Columbia University, and the priest said, "Yes," and the Jewish boy ASKED! He asked! He said, "I just read about Jesus Christ. Nobody could make that stuff up! What an incredible guy!" I'm rushing this, but ... "He was smart, tough and kind and at the same time, what courage, what guts, what a great message. Cool dude" (or whatever his nomenclature was!). "But, you Christians" (this is the Jewish guy talking to the chaplain), "you Christians say that this Jesus was the Messiah, but we Jews, we believe that when the Messiah comes he'll make everything right immediately. All things solved, then and there." And the priest, because the boy was asking, responded, "Do you know your Jewish scriptures?" What you and I call the Old Testament. And the Jewish guy said, "Sure, I studied with a rabbi for many years." "Well, have you read Isaiah? Isaiah is regarded by Jews as their greatest prophet. The wisest, smartest prophet. And Isaiah said that when the Messiah comes he will be a servant (one who serves or helps) who will suffer, suffer, suffer. And Jesus, who is our Messiah, said that when He came He would plant a seed, because at this point the Jewish boy had leapt off the chair, grabbed the New York Times from the priest's coffee table and waved it under the priest's nose! He said, "Look at this! Just read the headlines of the paper! War and rape and poverty and misery! You say the Messiah has come in the form of Jesus? I don't see any change. I see no change." And the priest said, "All right - you asked. Jesus said, He came to give His word, His teaching, what He wants us to do, as a seed! A seed! It's still growing!" You gotta be patient! What are you gonna do! Anyhow, at the Easter vigil two years ago, the Jew became a Roman Catholic, and according to the chaplain, he's still arguing. Still asking! But he's made his decision - I'll go with Christ, and carry the cross, it's not a sick joke. But I'm going to keep asking.

And the last is the colt - the mule, the donkey, the jackass. That disciples untie and they bring to our Lord and our Lord climbs on it. Have you ever seen the movie (some of you maybe) called Shrek? I babysit on occasion and I have seen Shrek 42 times. (Laughter!) "I want to see Shrek again, Fr. Dibble!" OK. And there is in Shrek, it's an animated cartoon, very well done - and there is in Shrek a jackass. A donkey. He's not brilliant, but he's common sense shrewd and good-hearted. But he's a jackass. And I want you to pretend for a minute (bear with me) that the jackass carrying our Lord into Jerusalem, in today's Gospel, can talk and we can hear what the jackass is saying and thinking. The jackass is thinking, "What are you gonna do? They plant this guy on my back, and these people are putting all kinds of palm, and they're singing 'Hosanna,' you know, what you do when a King enters a city! I don't get it - I mean, a King," (and the jackass is right about this - when you study the history of the day - when a King or ruler, any kind of imperial force, entered a city, he entered on a magnificent steed. A magnificent horse that neighed and pawed the turf and was just beautiful to look upon - a charger) "and this guy is coming in on me, a jackass!" Now, our Lord is saying to us something that, for most of us, hasn't even yet sunk in. And I don't think we can be blamed, we're still so human. It still hasn't quite sunk in that His kingdom is so humble

it comes in on a mule. See, it's a powerful thing that Jesus is trying to say, "I am your King! The universe is mine, but I'm coming to you on a jackass!" Gonna take another maybe two thousand years for us to absorb what that is, but we accept - the jackass accepts Jesus on his back, we accept that, "Wow, that's interesting."

Twice in my life (I promise to keep this short), but twice I've come to one of those things where I've very dramatically (as usual for me), I had to make a decision. Once in 1958 and once in 1991. You know, where the thing gets so bad, family troubles, etc. Ugh. And at the point in 1991 when I was feeling that way, I was in the Metropolitan Museum ("Well, you should have been in Church!" I know, I know.). And I came to this painting that was on loan from Oslo, I think. It's a famous painting - I'm sure many of you have seen it. It's so famous now it's on T-shirts. Kind of superficializing it. But it wasn't painted by a superficial man. And what it says is "Chaos." It's by Edward Munch. And, it's somebody - the whole painting is a face and he's looking at you. It's dusk, twilight. Deep, dark, depressing dusk is falling and he's on some kind of a bridge. There are people behind him, but so far behind him they cannot reach him or touch him or console him. And he stares out at us, like this (gestures). And I looked at it, and I said, "That's it. That's the other road. That's chaos. I'm in great agony but I won't say anything and I'll keep it inside and I'll be all right, but I'm going crazy with this pain." Munch called it "The Scream," and later on he re-titled it, he called it "The Silent Scream." Yeah. It's honest - that's the route. And the pain gets too bad, or the image you and I have seen so often, a young Jewish man carrying a cross and telling us we're going to live forever.

Uh, Christ or chaos. Ten days ago, on Alhambra Valley Road in Martinez, where I live with a small dog and occasionally baby sit those children, there was around two in the morning a crack of thunder and a bolt of lightening that lit up the room. My terrier dived under the bed, and I sat bolt upright in the bed, and I said, "Oh, Christ!" I assure you, it was petitionary prayer. Because I followed it up fast with, "Is Lord." The dog came out from under the bed. Sometimes, your pain and your fear is almost blended into the same words as your faith, as your prayer! Oh Christ, is Lord!

Anyhow, St. Francis of Assisi said once, "We're all jackasses. Not really very evil or malicious, but making lots of mistakes, but obedient and accepting, in this case, our Lord on your back." Anyhow, even if there's just one person at this Mass today who's going that kind of suffering, the very fact that you're here and you've been listening patiently to me, etc., etc. Pain, fear, doubt, what are you gonna do? Your answer is, "I choose Christ. I choose the path of cross and resurrection." That's what you say to that tiny, insistent voice that keeps saying, "What are you gonna do?"