

"Truth"

Homily of September 28, 2003

by Fr. Michael Dibble

In these little missals that are in some of the pews, there is a little phrase that is just before the gospel. It says, "Your word, Lord, is truth. Consecrate us in the truth." That is what I would like to think about, with your help, this morning.... truth.

I had a classmate in the eighth grade, back in New York City, Catholic school. His name was "Lukey Stanton." I say his name with honor. And in the eighth grade when he wanted to impress me with the veracity, integrity, and profundity of what he was about to say, Lukey Stanton would invoke, "Honest to God, Dib, it's the troot!" Lukey hated lying! And so, about truth. I'll spare you an acronym, but there are four words that rhyme, about truth. You can lose it. You can misuse it. You can confuse it. And, finally, choose truth. And you have already done that by sitting here this morning. That's true. By opting, on a lovely summer Sunday morning, to come to church, at some level, you have chosen truth. There is some truth you want to hold onto. You want to go there, for Christ.

Lose truth.... Not you, we. We can lose truth. Remember when Our Lord is standing there, half naked and covered with blood. He is on trial and he is talking to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. And Pilate says, "Who are you?" Jesus replies, "I am the truth.... I am the truth. Truth can set you free." He doesn't say much to Pilate but he does say that. And Pilate says (in Latin), "Quid es veritas? Veritas... Quid es veritas?" ("Truth... What's truth?") Poor, disillusioned, fed-up, washed-up Pontius Pilate... "Truth... What's truth?"

In the 50's and 60's there was the philosophy of "No truth." It was called "Nihilism." "Nihil" is the Latin word that means "nothing." And when I was shelving books, summer job at Columbia University, the guy next to me (We were both in college.)... Let's call him "Igor." And Igor said, "I am a nihilist." He did, first day of work. "I am a nihilist. There is no truth. There is no truth. There is absolutely no statement that you can believe is true." Now he'd invoke that frequently at lunch, July and August... By the end of August, I finally said, "Say it again." He said, "There is no statement that is absolutely true!" I said, "Except that one." Because if you have invested intellectually, implicitly and explicitly, in that declarative sentence ("There is no statement that is absolutely true!") at least you believe that's true. Ha-ha-ha! ...I felt so smug. He was a good guy. He did kind of scratch his head a bit and I felt kind of happy. I said, "If there is one thing that is true, there may be a couple of others."

And then, even earlier than that there was a philosophy called "Solipsism." It was very popular. Like fashions and songs, philosophies come in and go out. And this philosophy was especially popular in England. It is called "Solipsism" from the Latin word that means "one... alone." And the progenitor of that, who published a dissertation (It was a hot best seller because it was "in" for awhile.) was a Professor Berkeley. His name is spelled the same as the city of Berkeley, but

in England it was pronounced "Barkley." He published his philosophical dissertation which said, again, "There is no such thing as truth.... The only thing you can believe is your own head. That is the only thing that is true, your own head. Everything else is an illusion or a delusion. The only thing that exists in the cosmos is your thought. That is it!"

Now, the story that next follows, I verified. About a year later after this book was a best seller. He was at a dinner party in London, at Park Lane, which is very posh. Berkeley was at dinner with a lot of people and he turned to the Duchess and he said, "Would you pass me the salt?" The Duchess said, "Professor Berkeley, I have read your dissertation on the fact that there is nothing around but you. So, there is no me here. There is no dinner here, and there is no salt here." And then she said, "Evidently, in your search for salt, you really are quite literally 'on your own'." That's a true story.

Then, you can misuse the truth. We all do at times. We are fallen human creatures. We can misuse truth by lying or by overdoing it where you hurt people deliberately, or exclude it. ("We have exclusive truth.") There is always a group like that in the Church, anywhere... "We have exclusive hold on the truth!" You notice in the readings today some people keep getting mad because "they are barging in on our truth!"

Lying.... In the National Geographic decades ago, there was an article about a primitive tribe in Tierra del Fuego, the tip of South America. In this tribe, they honored, above all, the truth. When some member of this primitive community were caught in a lie and wouldn't confess the lie, wouldn't admit "I lied," whenever they gathered for the communal meal which was once a week, the liar who didn't tell the truth would be subjected to what the article called "the stoney stare of silence," week after week after week. No one would speak to the liar until she or he confessed, and then they would all talk. Scarey. The stoney stare. Tell the truth.

Bob Hope, who recently died, made a movie in the 30's called "Nothing but the truth." In the movie he is going to win a million dollars at the end of the week if he tells everybody the rigorous and absolute truth to any question posed to him. It has been so long since I have seen the movie, but, as I recall, they had a lawyer who followed Bob Hope around all that week to make sure he told nothing but the truth. At one point, his beautiful girlfriend comes to him, "Honey, what do you think of my brain? ...Honey, what do you think of my brain?" "I love you. You are beautiful and I love you." "I know, but answer the question. What do you think of my intelligence?" "Honey, I love you if you have the brain pan of a retarded oyster!"

And then there is the exclusive. We have exclusive control of the truth. We monopolize the truth, and you unwashed masses don't come close to us. Even St. John, that lovable young apostle, who had this hero worship case on Christ, remember in the gospel today, "Lord, we saw this guy going around driving bad things out of people, demons, and we told him to knock it off because he doesn't belong to our "Twelve Apostles Club." I'm transliterating. And Our Lord says, "If the man is doing something good, using my name, then he is not an enemy. Might be

for us.” To exclude others from the truth because it is our special province is misusing it.

Then there is the confusing of truth or confused-about-truth as you and I are, I think, a lot, especially when we read morning headlines and questions of human suffering and so forth. Now, I thought everyone who had been brought up a Catholic had heard this story until they were so sick of it. but I talked to a couple of educated Catholics this week. They never had heard it. It’s very short. It’s a legend, but the point it makes helps me sometimes and maybe one of you.

St. Augustine was a great brain in the fifth century, a great Catholic Christian scholar, and he wrote shelves of brilliant books. But he was so dissatisfied he wasn’t getting all the answers, for example, two issues such as suffering. He was walking along the beach in northern Africa one evening early and there was a little kid on the beach. And the little kid had a sand bucket, and the kid would run to the surf and fill the bucket with water and come back and pour the bucket into the hole in the sand on the beach, back and forth and back and forth. Around the third trip, St. Augustine, says the legend, leans over and asks, “What are you doing?” And the little kid looks up and says, “I am going to fill this hole with all the water in the ocean.” And Augustine very gently says, “That’s impossible for you to do.” The child looks up, very tenderly and looks Augustine in the eye and says, “So is it true for you, Augustine. You cannot force the infinite creative power of a personal God into the tiny, finite opening of your brain. So, be at peace.” And then the kid vanishes, which is a good exit line.

But I find the story helps me, in my periodic rages at God for allowing this and not putting an end to that. If he is God, no wonder I don’t get it completely. And hang onto Jesus and his word. That’s enough truth to get us through the day.

And then, finally, choosing truth, which you have done. I mean that most seriously, coming to Mass, choosing this true search, this true end of the search. Our Lord, on trial, said to Pilate, “I am the truth. I came to speak the truth, and the truth can set you free.” This is Our Lord speaking. We mustn’t take it for granted (“Oh, I’ve heard that before!”) It’s precious. “I am the truth.” And poor, disillusioned, fed-up-to-here Pilate says, “Oh, what’s the truth?” But you must believe at some level that Jesus is the truth of God, God’s mercy, His tenderness, He cares, hang on. The cross is not a waste of time. Another thing that I came across again this week (And it hit me.) and you probably got to suffer much more from it than I do because I am kind of sheltered in my little house with my little dog, but you go out to work and school and you are home. And the truth that Jesus says that gave me a chill and then gave me comfort was Our Lord says in the gospel, “If you are ashamed of me and my word” (That means His teaching.) “then I will be ashamed of you when we meet face to face at the end of time.” So when you are hassled (I am not talking about this or that scandal or this or that priest, or anything, just about Jesus, Jesus’ teaching.) and some sophisticated sneer meets you at the office or school or Safeway, don’t be ashamed to say, “I believe in Jesus and His word. Don’t understand it all, but my truth is Jesus.”

And finally that thing in the gospel today that is a real waker-upper, “If your eye causes you to

sin, pluck it out. Get rid of that internet. And if your hand causes you to sin, lop it off.” That is so vivid! So I went to my scholarly Bible books, written by solid, conservative Catholic scholars. And hold onto your hats, folks, because this is the explanation, written by Father Raymond Brown, who is so great. But the phrase is, “This particular pericope” (That means a little segment.) “is a clear example of the hermeneutics of Hebraic hyperbole.” ... Isn’t that a comfort? And all that Father Brown means is that to a Jewish audience listening to Our Lord’s words today, the Jewish interpretation was, “This is an exaggeration using parts of the body about parts of life that are very important to you.”

Quick examples: Money is very important. I wouldn’t be here if, for forty years, Catholic people hadn’t paid so that I could eat and sleep in a bed. And, when my pension kicks in next year, I am taking you all to lunch! But, when money is carried to the excess of greed, insensate, mindless greed, “Cut it off,” says Christ. It is going to destroy you. It is going to drag you down to Hell, even on this planet. Another great, important part of life, sexual pleasure of married people, is a great true joy. (I’ve heard that, several times.) So, it’s clearly a truth of life. But if something that is a true joy, a legitimate pleasure, is distorted to adultery and infidelity, cut it out. It is going to destroy you and people you care about. And power.... Power is good. We have got to have power to delegate and get things organized, and make sure there are locks on the door.... But, when it is used to crush people and manipulate people, lop it off or you wind up, even here, in Hell. That ‘s what Our Lord means, with his hermeneutics of Hebraic hyperbole.

OK, the last thing is... I got this from the laity. I love Catholic nomenclature. You are the laity, and Father Gerry and I, we are the clergy-ty. And I got this, (The first thing is about truth and the second thing is about truth.) from the laity, a lay woman in upstate New York and a layman who worked on Wall Street. It has to do with the pain of lies, the destruction of truth. And it is pain. If any of you at this Mass are suffering because someone has lied to you and you can still feel the pain (It’s a real wound. It is.), so many people have told me that this works. But one of the ladies upstate gave me a poem. It’s a silly, dinky little kid’s poem. But it sticks, especially if you say it at Communion.

Jesus, Lord, lift this rage.
Help me, Lord, turn the page.

Don’t say “Obliterate it.” You can’t. But lift a little bit, lift this rage. Help me, Lord, turn the page. Let me get on with my life. It has helped a lot of laity and one clergy-ty.

And the other one I got from a Wall Street executive who had told a lie. (I got his permission and all to say this.) But he had told a lie that caused a lot of pain in the business, especially with a colleague. And he sent this guy this simple line:

It’s wrong to lie to a friend.
Give me time to make an amend.

This is a graduate from college and a big executive, a simple little poem but it worked. I have never known these kinds of things not to work, if it is just easing your heart. It is wrong to lie to a friend. Help me, friend, to make an amend.

Now, Father and I, and every other priest who gets up on Sunday and subjects you to our thinking, sometimes I think we get the thought, "If only, sitting at this desk, I could come across with a statement, a concept, that would electrify the people, the laity, that they would rush out into the street and put an end to the shuns, the "sions".... oppression, abortion, persecution, long-winded oration. But there is nothing that you and I can do about those miseries and tragedies on this particular Sunday. But we can, with His help, work on these little things, on ourselves. That is all Jesus is constantly asking people, on your own heart and mind, you know about telling the truth and making up for lies. Anyhow, wherever you are, Lukey Stanton, honest to God, that's the troot!"