

"Commitment and Commercialism"

Homily of October 19, 2003

by Father Brian Joyce

This week, throughout the Church, we observed and celebrated the 25th anniversary of John Paul II as our pope. We saw him in the media and heard of him in the press as strong-willed and determined and, at the same time, as elderly and ill and fragile and frail. Some feel that the time has come, and past time, for him to retire. And others feel that he remains one amazingly strong voice for the poor of the world and a powerful witness precisely because of his sickness. As one social worker commented, and it was quoted in yesterday's Contra Costa Times, "Usually our society doesn't tolerate sick people." John Paul has shown that, even with sickness, you can go on. To me, the most striking description I have heard recently of Pope John Paul II came from a group who traveled with him over the last twenty-five years on his journeys as he criss-crossed the globe. They said he was always knocking himself out with no concern for his own health or his own comfort. He would say, "Just get me there and let me preach the gospel." He was never concerned with what food there would be or where he would sleep, or how they would get there or how difficult it might be. This is the way they described him, and I put it in my letter this weekend: "a selfless person in a me-first world."

"Me-first," what's best for me, what's in it for me?... That's not a bad description of the two brothers in today's gospel, James and John, asking what's in it for me. And, unfortunately, it's not too bad a description of all ourselves. How would you describe our world, our culture, our society, today? Some people would describe it as "technological" because there are so many advances in medicine, in space travel, in war machines that are "technological." Some would describe our society mainly as a society of "instant information," whether it's the cell phone or the internet. Some would describe it as "media dominated." Some would say, "No. It's a society that, today, we question authority, more than anyone has in the past." Or, ours, especially in the United States, is a society of public distrust, from Watergate to Enron to the California Recall. I think, and I think it's unfortunate, probably the best description of our society is one of consumerism.

Consumerism.... It really struck home to me right after 9/11 when, right after that tragic event, we were looking to our leadership for a word of wisdom, a word of hope, a word of vision. You may recall what the President said, "Go shopping.... Go shopping." And the media said to us, "This is the time to buy cars." But it is not just that. Consumerism doesn't just have to do with buying cars. It has to do with our relationships, relationships where.... Take for example, marriage, where it is more and more common to have pre-nuptial agreements and very early divorce. What's in it for me and how low can the risk be? Or, in the Church, consumer society.... Very often we come to Church as if we would come to a convenience store, not to invest much, no commitment or risk, but to be served, to get something, to be waited on, or to pick and choose and do an amazing amount of church-hopping. I think it colors everything we do, our relationships, our Church. Consumerism colors everything. I describe it as looking for low-risk,

for no-risk, for a money-back guarantee.

I heard of a fundamentalist pastor in a little Tennessee village, who had two other fundamentalist members of another church visit him and start trying to proselytize him. They kept preaching to him about their strength and their faith and their miracles. He finally got tired of it, and he poured a big glass with arsenic in it. He said, "Here's the deal. If you drink the arsenic and you survive, I'll believe. I'll join your church, and so will my whole congregation." The two of them weren't sure what to do, so they went in the corner and talked for a moment. Then they came back and they said, "We have a better deal. You drink the arsenic, and then we'll raise you from the dead." It's a little bit like the two brothers in today's gospel. They want the reward, but they don't want to take any risk. And instead, Jesus says, "If you want to walk with me, there are two things you can count on. One is there is risk. There is a price. And the other is, it's not to be waited on, but to serve."

Now, we ourselves, all of us, as modern-day James and Johns, sons and daughters of Zebedee, if we want to walk with Jesus, what are we willing to commit to, what are we willing to risk? I am going to suggest three areas that we might consider and they are very obvious. There is nothing surprising about them. They are very simple, but they are very important. Here are the three.

Number one to consider, commitment to love God. The risk there is it takes time. It takes energy. One of the saints has said, "Prayer without discipline is illusion." And people pray in different ways: reading the scripture, getting up in the morning and just listing with God what it is that I have to do today and asking God's blessing, or, at the end of the day, taking a few moments to think of the day behind us and asking God to look at it with us, or perhaps silent centering, or memorized prayers, or a visit to Church, or reading a good spiritual book, or maybe just quieting down and reflecting so we get below the surface of our lives because that is where God will find us and we will find God. But it takes the risk of giving some time to it. So, one commitment to consider is the commitment to love God.

Another commitment is the commitment to put people and relationships first. It struck me that today we are having a book fair over in the school and inviting families to buy books for a needy school and for their own families and their children. And we are also having tickets to a talk by Dr. McKenzie about working with our children, and discipline. I read, just recently, a survey was done of thousands of families in California with small children, and out of something like six hundred, they only found two that, at least once a week, sat down and read something with their children.

It takes time to give quality to our relationships, and commitment to our relationships, whether it's our children or our neighbor or our friend. It is amazing how, if we watch the malls, the hours seem to be getting longer and longer. We seem to be needing and having more and more time for shopping and we now know we have in California, five times as many video stores as we have libraries. So, we have time to watch that. But, do we have time for one another? Do we

have time for one another? I think that is a commitment and risk we have to think about.

The third and last one is the commitment to make a difference, in our world, with strangers, with those near to us, to make a difference. How hard is that? I am going to give you a ten-second test to find out if you have any clues as to how hard it is to make a difference in people's lives.

OK. Here is the first test and you only have ten seconds. Can you think of three homilies (This one doesn't count.) that have made a difference in your life? Time is up and I see a lot of blank stares. Well, one of our accompanists, Florence Ball, always says to me, "You know, people never leave Mass humming the homily."

So, let's try this one, ten seconds. Can you think of three Christian hymns that have made a difference in your life? Still a few blank faces.

How about this one, ten seconds? Can you think of three people who have made a difference in your life?.... I see heads nodding. I see heads nodding. And I think those people probably weren't celebrities or Academy Award Winners, or Heisman Trophy Winners or politicians or national figures. They were people just like us, and we all have examples in our lives of people who have made a difference in a way that we can too.

I would suggest John Paul II and today's gospel say to us that we need to be a people, not celebrities, but a people who love God, a people who serve one another and a people who try to make a difference. Amen.