

"There Ain't No Way"
Homily of September 5, 2004
by Father Michael Dibble

A long time ago, 1961, I was standing on line at Grand Central Station on this weekend, the Labor Day Weekend to buy a ticket to go from New York to Poughkeepsie. Standing in front of me, waiting for tickets, were two young ladies who, as I was listening to their conversation, were going back to Vassar. Now Vassar College was a couple of blocks away from the high school where I was teaching. And they were talking away animatedly, and I was, as usual, snooping. And I could tell from their drawls (They had this delicious Southern creme de cocoa drawl!)..... One kept a steady monologue, talking to her friend. Every so often the friend would interrupt and say, "There ain't no way! There ain't no way!.... There ain't no way!" And every time she said it, I thought it fit perfectly! And, all the way back up to Poughkeepsie (I sat behind them on the train, the New York Central.), that southern girl, "There ain't no way....." Well, when I read today's gospel, a couple of weeks ago, and knew it was my turn to give the Sunday talk, a voice whispered in my ear, "There ain't no way.... you're going to make that sound good!"

I told some of you that I have a buzzard, an invisible buzzard, kind of like an evil demon, an invisible buzzard that other people call "the committee in my head," the voices in my head. I call it "the buzzard" and he flaps in every so often and gives me a hard time. And he did about today's gospel. By the way, I once told a brilliant nun, who was also a psychiatrist, about my buzzards, and she said, "You see 'buzzards,' Father?" She backed ever-so-gently away. But you know what I mean. As an English teacher, I love metaphors and mine is "the buzzard." Gives me a hard time, ever since I was a kid! And maybe a few of you recognize that kind of thing. But, the buzzard flapped in. He said, "There is no way, Father Feel Good, that you are going to make that gospel cute and whimsical and likeable and funny." Christ must have been having a bad day! But He is telling them the truth!

So, I grabbed my six solid Catholic Bible scholar books, really wonderful books, especially one by Father Raymond Brown, the whole New Testament with all the fresh translations, good solid stuff. Anyhow, when Our Lord says you got to hate your father and your mother..... That is known today, (and we know more now about Aramaic and Greek in the past thirty years than we have for two thousand years, thanks to fresh translations, the Dead Sea Scrolls, etc.) the word "hate" there, as a "Semitic hyperbole." You know what hyperbole is. "Now I told you a thousand times not to put your finger in the pencil sharpener!" Hyperbole! And when Our Lord says, "You got to hate father and mother and property," the audience listening knows it meant "be willing to detach, be willing to say goodbye to all that stuff." And many of the people listening to Our Lord when He said this, within a few years, they had to detach. They were thrown out of the synagogue because they taught Jesus' teaching. They went into exile, torture, and martyrdom, many of them. They did have to say goodbye, detach!

And then at the end of the gospel, Our Lord says "You can't be my disciple unless you are willing to renounce all your possessions," as many of them had to. Now, again, that is Semitic (Jewish) hyperbole. Everyone listening to Him knew what He meant. Obviously, we (you and I) cannot renounce all of the possessions in the literal sense. I mean it would be very distressing if we found that there was a Vatican letter on the pastor's desk saying that all upper and middle class Catholics in Christ the King Parish are to renounce all their possessions and move promptly to the Mojave Dessert. We'd say, "Wait a minute. No. No...." Obviously it is important that you have some possessions in order to keep this Church going, the Parish going, the St. Vincent dePaul Society that helps the poor, keep them going five days a week, pay me a stipend so I can buy frozen yogurt and kibbles for my dog. You know what Our Lord meant, that we have to be willing, in great extremity, to follow Christ. Unless at some level you really were willing to do that, you wouldn't be listening to me ranting up here on a lovely Sunday morning. You wouldn't. At some level, of course. But we know what Our Lord means. In an ultimate choice, we have to go for Christ.. And so, we do.

What I would like to talk about today is one possession that I find very hard to renounce and give up. If there is just one other human being at this Mass who has the same kind of temperament as I, then it is worth talking about, a kind of clinging to the possession of privacy, being inconspicuous, leave me alone. I don't want to rock the boat. I don't want to be embarrassed, self-conscious, conspicuous, and God, I don't want to be un-cool. So I will cling to the possession of polite dignified silence when, if I am a follower of Christ, I should say something. I should speak up. OK, it's a very small example but it is the only one I have got. I had twelve of them but I have cut them down to two, you will be very happy to hear.

The first was, and I can only draw from personal experience (Otherwise, the stuff is vapor and abstractions.) but a year after I was a priest, upstate, in a little country parish, one year after, I went to this Labor Day Weekend Barbecue. My whole first year in this little parish in upstate New York was very unhappy because they loved the priest who was before me and I took his place and they all resented me. They did! They called me "Sir" and "Reverend." No one called me "Father." It was a very chilly year. But it was my second Labor Day there so I went to this big parish bash with the community pool and hot dogs and hamburgers and hanging around and being social. And I went there in mufti, in disguise. I don't think anyone recognized me. They barely knew who I was, even after a year. And I was sitting at this big table. (Now, I am not the hero of this story, quite the opposite!) They were passing down the hamburgers. No one even adverted to this little guy, and sitting at the same table was a boy sixteen. He went to public high school, but he came to religion class once a week, "released time," they used to call it. He came to religion class taught by me, once a week. He was the most quiet, shy, most inhibited, repressed, afflicted with acne, hunched shoulders. I am not exaggerating any of this and he never said a word, the whole year, in that religion class. Very quiet. Nowadays, he would be dismissed in the wretched nomenclature of our times as a "dweeb, a dork and a nerd." (Of course, in many ways, I identified totally with him.) And he was sitting at this table. And there had been a good deal of beer-swilling. I was abstemiously sipping sasparilla. They were getting a little bit buzzed,

some of these grown-ups, and one of the men, halfway through this bash, made the most venomous, vicious, racist joke. And everybody around the table..... "Pass the mustard...." and so on. I kept chewing my hamburger which was turning to ashes in my mouth, and the kid didn't laugh, conspicuous at this table. He was dead silent. So, the guy who made the venomous, racial joke which wasn't even funny, "What's the matter? Don't you think it's funny?" And the kid opened his mouth and said, "No. I think it was dumb and mean." "You didn't enjoy it?""No.""Is something wrong with you?""No." And the kid got up, folded his napkin, and walked away.

Now, that was a long time ago and this Labor Day Weekend I am telling you about him. Whereas I, wanting to be loved and wanting to be accepted, chewed my hamburger, and this kid just said, "No." He wasn't nasty and he wasn't a brat. Years later, I heard the expression, " 'No' is a complete sentence." And I honor him to this day. That precious resource that he didn't want to renounce about "Leave me alone. I am quiet and I am shy and I got acne." He gave up that possession of his own inconspicuous privacy and he said, "No, not funny." OK. It's hard sometimes.

The second and last example was ten years before that. I was in high school. I was studying to be a priest in a Catholic minor seminary. In the summer and after school, I worked in Butler Library, which was the big library of Columbia University, down in the stacks shelving books and sending books up in the chute. With me was a colleague, one year older. Let's call him "Eddie, the Existentialist." He was very smart, witheringly smart and caustic and sarcastic and cool, the ultimate cool! And he was an atheist and semi-communist. He looked at me, when he found out what I was studying to be, with a kind of mingled contempt and compassion. "You're going to be a priest? a Catholic?" Anyhow, he was really smart and he was basically good-hearted. But, oh, he was so witheringly contemptuous. And he read Sartre and Camus, and on one occasion, he said, just before the end of the summer "We're going to MOMA." (Museum of Modern Art on Fifth Avenue) "There's a new exhibit of existentialist absurdist art." So, we went there. You walk up the stairwell and they had this big exhibit, absurdist art. (Everything is absurd and meaningless.) It was a giant sculptured white porcelain toilet bowl and emerging from the toilet bowl was this wizened hand, holding a giant toothbrush. And existentialist Eddy turned to me and said, "That's IT! That's human existence. That's the meaninglessness of life, waste and decay, and the toothbrush so that you will be kissing sweet. That's what it's all about." That's what he said. Aaugh....Some of you must know what it's like to be with someone who is so completely disdainful and contemptuous and cool.

We proceeded through the museum, and then we got to "Christina's World." You may have seen it. It's a famous American painting by Andrew Wyeth, "Christina's World." It's a painting of a young woman. She has her back to us, and (It's on a farm.) she is stretched out in the grass. It's like she has just awakened from a summer nap, and she is sitting and looking ahead, at what is in the distance. And there is a wisp of hair that the wind is blowing. She's wearing a faded pink dress. We can only see her from the back as she is reclining. If you look carefully, you can see that there is something wrong with Christina's body. It is twisted. Now, when I read up on it

later, there really was a Christina and she was crippled. Her hand, as she is awakened from her nap, is grasping the ground. That delicate, very thin hand is full of tension. She is gazing ahead and what she sees in the distance is home, a barn and a house and, next to the house, a washline and a bit of wash flapping in the summer breeze. And she is looking. I stared and I stared. And Existentialist Eddie said, "Well?" I said, "That's great." ... "It's a woman on a lawn," (he said.) I don't know where I got the guts. I said, "That's life. She hasn't quite finished her work yet, and she's tired. I think there is something physically wrong, and she is tense. She is straining at the grass.... and she is looking to home. And home is heaven when the struggle is over, the work is fully done, back home.... home, heaven." Eddie stood up from the bench and he looked at me and he said, "Dib, you need help." In other words, how could anyone transmogrify a girl and a lawn with human existence and paradise?

But to this day, I am so glad I said what I felt. And when you come down to it really, when you reach a certain age on Planet Earth it is one or the other, if you have a brain or a heart, either life is basically waste and decay and death and a few cosmetic attempts to make it look nice (the toothbrush) or it is struggle and tension, but the promise of Christ and heaven and the cross being carried with hope.

Anyhow, back to the girls from Vassar.... There ain't no way! Now, I want you to pretend. The final fantasy of today is that the buzzard lands on all your shoulders and it says, "There ain't no way you are going to have the courage to be conspicuous and a Catholic Christian. There ain't no way you are going to speak up and defend something at work or with colleagues or even with family, that you truly believe. There ain't no way you are going to do it." And we would say, "There ain't no way it's easy, but maybe once or twice I will, not to cause a fight, not to make people mad, just to say 'No.' "

Then the buzzard goes on and says, "The teachings of Jesus Christ have been around two thousand years and you still got greed and you still got war and you still got violence and you still got abortion and you still got misery and poverty. Why don't you just cash in the whole thing?" And then we would say, I hope, "There ain't no way that the teachings of Jesus can happen even in two thousand years. How long has the human species been on this planet? Two thousand years is a drop in the bucket. Christ dropped a seed. We only do today what we can do today."

And then there is a great voice from above, Christ's. He says, "There ain't no way these people have to carry the cross alone. There ain't no way I promise you it will be easy. There ain't no way I am going to leave them without hope, and the Church and the sacraments and My love and protection every single day. There ain't no way they are alone. So, buzzard, buzz off!"