

“Oy!”

Homily of November 11, 2004
by Father Michael Dibble

In the mid-forties in New York City, there was a clothing store for kids, cut-rate clothing. My father was a widower. He had two small boys, and he would bring us down to this store for the inexpensive clothing for kids. It was called “Annie’s.” Annie was a small, rotund Jewish lady and she talked like a New York Jew. And I’m not mocking that. I love that! Her name was “Annie.” Every so often Annie would go like this (extend her arms, open-handed, into the air). And she would say, “Oy! I throw up my hands. I throw up my hands. I cannot get the size..... The shoes, I throw up my hands. The shoes won’t be here ‘til Tuesday.”

Well, when scripture scholars study today’s gospel, Oy! They throw up their hands, because it’s so compact. There are so many things in it. They have, eventually, because we have more scripture scholars in our life time than ever before, studying the actual Greek and the Aramaic . Our Lord is talking about different things. But it is all packed in together in the gospel. He is talking about warning the people about the fact that the temple and Jerusalem, some years later, 70 A.D., are going to be destroyed. And the Romans did, in 70 A.D. They leveled the whole city. And He is also talking about the end of the world.

Now, when I study the six Catholic Bible books, the Bible scholars, you come across a description like this. What I had just read is an “apocalyptic pericope.” And when you have relatives at Thanksgiving, you should say, ever so casually, “At our parish, Christ the King, the priests frequently elucidate the apocalyptic pericopes, with an exegesis that’s truly precocious..... Pass the gravy.” It’s in trying to explain these complex theological warnings that Our Lord is giving that so many scripture scholars, when they are honest, say, “Oy! I throw up my hands.” They have to pick it apart. But they are solid words from Christ. And the words (I double-checked on this.) you know, “if you persevere to the end you are going to save your life,” He means “eternal life.” You know some of the people listening to Him on this occasion, they died. Ten apostles died, martyrs. He is talking about eternal life. And I hope you are not tempted, as I was as a child, to yawn, “Oh, eternal life.” Christ never bored anybody, did He? They either loved Him or they hated Him. When He was on this planet, Jesus never bored anybody. Why would He want to bore us for all eternity? It’s going to be thrilling! And he is saying, if you persevere to the end you are going to save your eternal life. Hang on!. And the other word, evidently a better translation, is “endurance.” If you endure, endure to the end, you are going to live forever. Hang on! Hang on!

So, for today, I picked out two endurance tests that you and I go through. Two. You could give me dozens of endurance tests on this planet where, if you endure until the end, with Christ’s help, you

know it will be OK. Let's just take two endurance tests on Planet Earth. Oy! If you are like me, I want to throw up my hands. The first is the cross to bear, the cross to bear, as many of you, if not everybody around here this morning is bearing some kind of cross. And the second, at the end, wear and tear. That's an endurance test, wear and tear.

Cross to bear.... Just reading the morning headlines, day after day, year after year, cross to bear. "Are you there? Are you there?" There was an article in a magazine recently, "Is there a God?" And this was a letter, sent to the magazine about the article. "Why should we care about the existence of God when all the evidence is there that our interest is not reciprocated?" Ah, doesn't anyone sometimes feel like that? I do. Regularly, almost every morning, reading the headlines. "Where are you?" Put a stop to this!" The cross to bear.... And the more devout, and the more prayerful the Catholic, I sometimes wonder why we haven't all gotten together and taken out a civil action suit against God. "How can You let this go on?" Well, we don't know, and the best brains in Christianity for two thousand years have tried to explain the mystery of evil and pain.

But we do have Him. We do have Christ. When in doubt, hear Christ out. It's bad poetry but it's good endurance. When in doubt, hear Christ out. When I was studying to be a priest, for six years in the seminary, we would sit around the cafeteria table and discuss "What will save people and what will save the Church?" Canon law, the Laws of the Church, Moral Theology especially the sex stuff because that's interesting, Dogmatic Theology, what they must believe to be saved, Liturgical Reform, all good stuff. But it took us a while to figure out towards the end of those six years.... Christ! We finally got to the Bible. I am sure you know, because the Protestants made so much emphasis on the Bible, the Catholic Church didn't put that much emphasis on it, much more on Canon Law, the Sacraments, Church Law. We don't have to be ashamed of Jesus Christ. Get back to Christ! All the other things that I have just mentioned are great, but they are behind Christ. And since you are sitting here listening to me babbling away, you don't have to be told that Christ, that Jewish man, was either kookoo or what He said He was. You can't have it both ways. "He was a lovely teacher." Not with some of the things He demanded and some of the things He claimed. He was crazy, a nice crazy Jewish man! OR He was what He said He was, the Son of God, the image of the invisible God. And when I get mad at God the Father (And I know I am talking childishly, but I am trying to be honest. You know, reading headlines....) Go to Christ. What did He say? "Carry your cross. Take it up daily. Follow Me."

I was once complaining to a priest in New York City, one of those Franciscan priests that hears confession all day long. I wasn't confessing. I was complaining, as usual. He said, "Hey, Buddy. Christ never sold us a bill of goods. Take up your cross daily. I will be with you all days. I go to prepare a place for you. You shall live forever, and not be bored. But take up your cross." The night before He died, Jesus looked at those eleven guys (Judas had split.) and said in this world, you are going to have troubles, persecutions. He says it today. But if you hang on, if you endure to the end, you're going to be saved forever. "Take up your cross and follow Me." You are not carrying it alone. That old Franciscan told me off. Thank God. "Hey, Buddy. Christ didn't sell us a bill of goods. He told us there'll be trouble but He will be with us all days." Either He was kookoo and we should go home and have breakfast or what He said makes sense.

It was so discouraging sometimes teaching religion to teenagers, good Catholic kids. They were. I loved those kids. But every so often, I'd whip out a series of quotes without telling them where the quotes came from. And then I would say, “Who said that?” “... Lincoln.... Shakespeare.... Willie Mays.... “ No, Christ said that. I remember some kids, usually freshmen who were more ingenuous, “Oh-h... Oh-h-h. Christ said that.” He was either crazy or He was what He said He was. Before the Franciscan finished mopping me up, mopping the floor with me, it was from him I got that acronym I dropped a few weeks ago, KISS. Keep It Simple, Sceptic. Keep it simple. When you are carrying the cross, I want to throw up my hands. What did Christ say? “Take up your cross. I am with you all days. I am the image of the invisible God. I go to prepare a place for you. You're going to have trouble.” He didn't sell us a bill of goods. It's OK. You can still say, “ I want to throw up my hands. Oy!” It doesn't make the cross any easier. No, but it does give it some meaning.

And the second and last is wear and tear. If you endure to the end, you will save your life forever, be happy forever, and a lot of happiness even down here. Wear and tear. Wear and tear. Middle age. Old age. This is a quote from Dante. I love quoting classics because it exalts my professorial posture. This is from Dante, a very devout, very smart, great Italian poet, one of the three greatest writers of all time maybe, a very smart Catholic. He even put a lot of the clergy in Hell. So you can tell that he was sophisticated. He is talking about his journey from Hell through Purgatory to Heaven. At this point, he says this, a famous quote from Dante's Divine Comedy, “We came to the middle of our journey in the middle of our life. We came to a dark wood where the path seemed to be lost, the light seemed to be gone and we were feeling oh so dark and oh so lost.” I wish I could read Italian. It must be gorgeous in Italian. And scholars, and I do keep up with literature, scholars to this day say Dante's great masterpiece, that particular line, “WE got lost. WE were scared. WE were in the dark. Is he talking about Beatrice (This beautiful lady he fell in love with so many years ago) or is he talking about Christ, because he refers to both of them throughout his entire work? Wear and tear. I'm getting a little tired of you. I'm getting a little tired of her. I'm getting a little tired of him. I'm getting a little tired of the Church.... Middle age. Wear and tear. That's an endurance test, hanging on through routine, grinding routine. “If she lifts that teacup in that supercilious way once more, I'm going to slam her with the cranberry sauce!””If he tells that stupid, risque joke again and has a third martini,If that priest keeps harping on what we already believe and don't need to be hit over the head with....” Wear and tear. Our Lord says “If you keep enduring to the end....” Our Lord never says, “You must never falter, you must never stumble, you must never doubt, you must never complain.” You just keep going. When in doubt, hear Christ out.

OK. The last thing is something I told you when I was lucky enough to get here five years ago, about wear and tear. I used to come out here every summer, had the summer off from my teaching job, and I would come out and visit my brother who lived out here. And then I would visit a Catholic family in Berkeley, a wife and a husband and four kids. On one occasion (This was the sixties.) I was downstairs, reading a book. And the book was called “I Am a Roman Catholic Priest. I Want to Get Married.” And upstairs was the wife, the mother of the four boys and the youngest kid, very little kid, she was administering unto this small squealing child a kind of medicine that required a good deal of athletic exercise on the part of the administrator. And the little kid was wailing, “Mommy, I

hate you. Ouch! Oh! I hate you Mommy!” This went on for twenty minutes as I continued to read my volume. She came downstairs. The kid had quieted down. She went to the fridge. She got out a soda. She came into the living room. She leaned against the wall. She hoisted the soda to her lips, and she said, “Michael, what are you reading?” And I said, “I am reading a great new book. Just came out. ‘I Am a Roman Catholic Priest. I Want to Get Married’ “ And she took a slug of the soda and said, “Uh-huh! I am a Catholic wife and mother. I want to be a priest.” Wear and tear. Oy! I throw up my hands! That’s all right. So did Moses.

It’s so great to see so many come to Communion every Sunday. When you come to Communion, talk to the Lord. It’s not just a cracker. It’s Christ there in some marvelous sacramental way. Complain about the cross to bear. Complain about the wear and tear. But just ask, with me together, you know. “Help me to endure, if not for a lifetime, at least ‘til next Sunday.” You can even add, “Oy!”