

“God’s Briefing Session”

Homily of June 12, 2005

by Father Iomar Daniels

There’s a story told of three sisters who were, as we say, “losing it” a little bit, and the first sister proceeded upstairs to run a bath for herself after a very difficult day’s work. As she stepped into the bathtub, she sh down to the second sister, who was on her way up the stairs, “Have I got one foot in or one foot out?” The second sister, who was on the stairs, hollered to the third sister who was just coming in from outside, “A way up or half way down?” The third sister, who had just knocked at the door, yelled at the second sister at the back door or at the front door?” So, you can see there is a little bit of uncertainty and confusion cre into that household.

Now, the same can be true of briefing sessions. Uncertainty and confusion can reign after such a session. you ever been to a “briefing session?” In most cases, “brief” can be the most inaccurate word to describe events. So-called briefing sessions, from my experience, can be anything but short. They can be like the preacher who doesn’t know how to use a full stop. Or it can be like, I suppose, a volcano spewing out lava never know when it is going to stop. Now, briefing sessions, in my experience, tend to lack substance, or so jargoned that they are very ineffective. They remind me of the t-shirt logo, “Your lips keep moving.... I hear is blah-blah-blah.” So, you may as well be feeding data into a computer because you can give it to you can’t expect an imaginative response. Now, as you know, using words today, especially in a world saturated with words, can be, and is, very demanding. And it is a challenge, to say the least.

A person, I believe, who was quite good at tapping into this word market was our late Pope, John Paul II 1979, when he visited Ireland, he quickly captured the minds and hearts of young people, with a heart-w and now best-remembered phrase, “Young people of Ireland,” he said “I love you!” Now, these words w extraordinary because they were not typical words, coming from the mouth of a Pope, or Popes in the pa because Popes were more at home with formulaic expressions that came from Papal bulls and encyclical what made this phrase exceptional and memorable was that it came from the heart. It was rich with since a depth of feeling. And, as we all know, too many words can be uttered without sincerity, without feeling in very bad taste. I think it was Solzenytzen who said that just one courageous word uttered can save the So, we cannot underestimate the power of words.

Another phrase that stayed with me from the Pope’s visit back in 1979 was uttered just before he left our country. His last words concluded, “Ireland, semper fidelis,” Ireland always faithful! Now this phrase, th three words, encapsulated a whole history of faith and courage, of faith certainly lived out under great persecution over the centuries. These three words moved a whole nation to a proud, a nostalgic tear. I su the same words wouldn’t have the same evocative effect today.

Now, Martin Luther King , as we all know, had a dream. “I have a dream,” he said. And he said it with conviction. He repeated it with sincerity. He spoke it from his heart. His dream was genuine. His words , real. This phrase, these four words, remain with us and remain popular because he spoke them from his h

And from today’s gospel, from Matthew’s gospel today, it would seem that Jesus too was equally good v words. We know that he could tell a good story. We know that he used parables to great effect. But what striking about today’s account is that he was equally good at briefing sessions! Jesus’ briefing of the two today’s gospel seems to have been done in haste however. He didn’t have much time to plan this, to mul each word or phrase. There is an urgency about it. The twelve have to be briefed in a hurry. Jesus noticee see, that the crowd gathered around him were troubled and abandoned. They were, in Matthew’s words,

sheep without a shepherd.” And he wanted to respond to their plight immediately. It demanded a briefing session and action, and, of course, the briefing session was short, was concise and to the point. There was no ambiguity, no fudging, no technical jargon. He lists the essentials. He gives a summary. He cuts to the chase as we would say. He goes to the bottom line. And the instructions Jesus gives to the twelve at this briefing are cold. They are not empty, not military style directives. No. They are fueled with passion. The words are imbued with feeling and compassion. He was stirred and he was moved to the very core of his being, to the heart of the sight of the crowds, we are told, Jesus’ heart was moved with pity. And this is what ignited this impromptu briefing, this very precise instructing of the twelve.

So, what was it that moved Jesus to the core of his being? What was troubling the crowd? Why did they feel abandoned? Well, we know that generally Jesus was moved by the pain of the sick, the darkness of the blind, the torment of the possessed. He was moved by the sorrowful, especially widows and orphans. He was moved by hunger. He was never content to see anybody go hungry. And I wonder now how much longer and how much more suffering must the world endure before our great leaders really grasp the problem of hunger in Africa and Asia. Now, last night, I heard on the news that they had found some way to relieve the debt of the poor countries who are struggling and that at the summit next month in Scotland there is great hope that the leaders of the world will make a radical change to help the starving of the world. He was moved by those who were deemed outcasts in society, especially the leper, and in this instance, however, he was moved by the people’s bewilderment, that people felt leaderless. Official religion, the Pharisees, the Scribes, the Priests, the Sadducees had let them down. They had nothing to offer them, except hundreds and hundreds of laws. Religion was becoming more of a hindrance than a support.

And I wonder about our own religion today. Do we become too preoccupied with laws and regulations and not occupied enough with love and compassion? So Jesus was moved by this situation and he briefed the twelve to counteract this dreadful reality. Jesus wanted to encourage rather than to discourage. He wanted to raise up the crowd, as we were told in today’s first reading, “on eagle’s wings.” In giving his briefing to the twelve, we can well understand why it worked because it was short and uncomplicated. So now, having heard it today, we can easily understand it and act upon it. Why? Well, because there is a vocations crisis in the Western world, the harvest is great. We need laborers for the harvest. We need new ways of exercising our priestly call from our baptism. We don’t need to travel too far to exercise our brief because there is a need in our local community. There are lost sheep in our own pastures. And then the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Jesus’ message. And we are to preach and to evangelize those people who are disillusioned, especially those who have exchanged consumerism for communion. We are to reach out to the poor, be life-giving, cure the sick, welcome those who feel unwelcome, get rid of our own demons, and not count the cost.

So, just as Jesus was shaken to the core by what he encountered two thousand years ago, so too should we be shaken to the core in 2005. We should be shaken to the core by the poverty, the disillusionment, the abandonment, the disenfranchisement, and neglect we find around us. And in the words of the poet Milton in his poem Lycidas, “The hungry sheep look up and they are not fed.” So, as we go about our daily tasks this week, let’s remember that we have been briefed, that our words and actions then be fueled with feelings of compassion and love to make God’s message flesh and fresh in our community. ... And, by the way, I try to use as many full stops as possible in this homily.