

“HBO”

Homily of November 12, 2005

by Fr. Michael Dibble

If you were reading along in the Missalette, you know that we cut out a lot. And we're allowed to do that. We can do the parts that aren't in brackets. It's done merely to save time on a Sunday morning, with traffic coming and going. But a little voice in me said, "I wonder if they cut the last part because the last part talks about the guy who got in trouble and he got the one talent, meaning some good stuff he was meant to use for himself and for other people, and he just buried it and the master got mad at this guy, the last guy and he throws him into darkness." Now Our Lord's listeners knew that the word "darkness" meant what we would call "Hell." Hell..... darkness, and it was meant to be a little scary.

St. Theresa of Avila saw a vision of Hell. St. Theresa of Avila was a first-class intellect. She was not hallucinatory, a great mind and a great mystic. And she said the thing that struck her about her vision of Hell was darkness. But then she goes on to say, this great saint that Einstein says he wants to meet when he gets to Heaven, Theresa of Avila, that we should not be afraid, we believers of Jesus Christ. Our Lord is Light and he is always with us. Don't be scared. He is always with us. He is Light and we are in his light nunca, now, you and I.

Today, with your help, I would like to talk a little bit about Hell and a few other things. And it's not an acronym but it helps me to remember, "HBO." Don't you dare mention that cable channel that shows dirty.....! It helps me to remember, HBO! HELL, BRIGHTNESS, OTHERS. Hell and then the opposite, Brightness and then Others, which the whole thing hinges on.

HELL! In forty-five years as a priest, I have not, in my own life as a priest, one priest, but I had not met anyone who said, in or out of confession, "The thought of Hell kept me from committing a crime or a sin." Maybe one man in forty-five years who thought of Hell.... And yet, we are scared of Hell. We don't want.... And yet, I don't think... Well, let me give an example of somebody who was not scared. His name was Billy Supple. He has gone to Heaven now, Billy. But he was in the eighth grade with us in 1948 and on Sunday morning in 1948, in Manhattan, we all stood up and we took a vow that we would not go to the Rialto Theatre on 42nd Street and see a new movie released called "The Outlaw." We all stood up, the whole church. And I remember the priest who was a very kind priest (He was.) but "under pain of Hell," you will not see this condemned movie, "The Outlaw." The Outlaw was a western featuring an actress named Jane Russell, and the reason for the condemnation was that her decolletage was excessive. And as we were all piling out of that nine o'clock Mass, in 1948 in Manhattan, Billy Supple who was in the eighth grade (But he was very tall for an eighth grade

guy, very tall!) leaned over to some of us and he said, "I'm going!" And he did. He went down in the subway and he told us the next morning, Monday morning, (We all flocked around him in the cloakroom!) he said, "The line was l o n g!" And I thought, "Of course it was long. It was condemned in every Catholic Church in New York!" And he rolled his eyes, and we all were there in the cloakroom, "Billy, what was it like?" And Billy Supple rolled his eyes and he said, "I can't begin to tell ya!" Wow! But I wouldn't have gone near the Rialto Theatre! I wouldn't have and I worried about Billy Supple.... The thought of Hell that he heard on Sunday, the risk of Hell, it didn't scare him. And maybe there is a certain basic spiritual common sense in so many of us that do know what warrants Hell.

And people use the expression "Hell on earth." And I saw it a few times. The first time I saw it, I was a young priest. This is a repeat story, but I need to hear it once a year. A girl was going to this very posh finishing school. It was college, but it was a very rich, posh finishing school. She was very nice, but she was in love with a boy who went to Notre Dame. This is forty-five years ago. And the boy loved her deeply. It was genuine. They were seniors in college, but she was playing these games with him, silly games in middle school, you know, not very bright middle school games, flirtation games. "I can't talk to you this week. I'm going out with that boy from Princeton." You know, on the telephone. This went on for two years, playing this hard-to-get, and he deeply, sincerely, genuinely, loved her. He did. I knew them both. And she loved him, but she was still so.... And he kept warning her, on the phone, at vacation, at Thanksgiving, you know, for three years, "Honey, don't play these games. It's real love. When I graduate, we get work, we'll get married." Anyhow, to make it a long story, it was in February of 1961 that she came to the rectory and she sat in the chair and he had broken up with her on the phone, after years of warning, "Don't play these mean games." And he broke up with her, and he meant it. He had suffered. And she was sitting in the chair, a cold February day, just "I'm burning up.... I'm burning up!" And I thought, "That's Hell! That's Hell! A cold February day and she is burning up, with shame, with pain, to take a love that was given genuinely and warning after warning after warning, and then finally she did it to herself!" I thought, "Oh, that's why Our Lord uses fire as a symbol of losing love forever."

The Catholic Church says there is such a thing as Hell. Our Lord talks about it. He is not trying to scare. He talks about Hell as a reality, and that there are inhabitants of Hell whom we call "the fallen angels." But the Catholic Church has never, ever put a person in Hell by name, not Judas, not Hitler, not Stalin. But it does warn us, as Our Lord did, it exists. And it is burning up forever because you have thrown away love forever. And that is not just pretty words. That girl showed it to me that February day! OK, that's Hell.

The next thing is BRIGHTNESS. Christ says, Our Lord says, and you have heard it so often, "I am the Light of the World." Now, if our Christ wasn't what he said he was, the Lord, that's an egomaniacal screed. That's insane! But if Our Lord really was what he said he was, and died to prove he was, then "I am the Light of the World...." Walk while you have the light. You are all in light now. You are here at Mass, a community of believers. You are in the light. St. Theresa of Avila had a vision of Hell. Remember? And she said, "It's all this awful darkness, but don't

be scared. Neustro Senor, Our Lord, is with us.” He is all light. We walk in the light.

Now, according to St. Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure and other one hundred percent conservative orthodox Catholic theologians, when we get to see Christ in the face, after death or at the Last Judgment, the people who go to Hell dive into Hell of their own volition. It is not the picture that sometimes we got as little kids, of God having a big ledger. “Oh, look at all these sins you got here, Harry! Down you go!” No. According to good Catholic theology, the people who see Christ in the face and who can’t take it, swerve about and, to use the metaphor, dive into Hell. The door of Heaven is not slammed from the inside. We slam it. We don’t want any part of him, of Paradise.

Now, the reason, and please bear with this figure of speech, (I know I used it three years ago, but it sure helps me.).... When we do the things that Our Lord says we got to do, and I remember an old nun saying, “It’s so simple. He put it there at the Last Judgment, when Christ was talking to his apostles. ‘Did you feed the hungry? Did you clothe the naked? When somebody was sick, did you visit?’ That’s it! Christ puts that at the Last Judgment.” If people, if there be ever on this planet, a human being who spent his or her life entirely rejecting using that talent to help, to serve, to be of some kind of healing, jail, prison, sick, hungry, feeding the needy, if they spent their whole lives that way, they have not been building glasses. That’s the example that contemporary theologians use from Aquinas and others, that during our lives, if we follow Our Lord’s suggestions and even if we sin, if we repent and do the good things he wants us to do, that we’ve heard since we were kids, we are building this wonderful pair of sunglasses. You know, if you are at the beach and it is blazing hot, it is almost white-hot, and you look up at the sun, you say, “Oh! I can’t. Give me some sunglasses.” Well, that’s like seeing Christ in the face, that when we die, there is this incredible brightness. And if we have been building these sunglasses through life, of doing good, to put it in this banal way, then we’ve got the sunglasses when we see Christ in the face. And we will rush to embrace him! We aren’t scared of the brightness! But, let’s say there is somebody named Igor who spent his entire life rejecting that kind of Christ-like help. He sees God and he says, “NO!” And he slams the door. It’s a much more Biblically-centered idea. If somebody ever goes to Hell, they want to! They couldn’t take that kind of light.

And finally, OTHERS. helping others. It sounds so corny. But it’s so richly Christ-like, helping others. That’s the talent. It’s one talent. Two examples.... The one the old nun, Sister Eileen, told me, at the Last Judgment, Christ said, “If you did these good things, come on in. Welcome home! And if you didn’t, go away. You wouldn’t like it up her anyhow.”

The other is Tuc’s very tiny examples. My time is my own. I work hard all week long. My time is my own. It’s precious. Sometimes, and I tell you it’s a very tiny example, but sometimes you will be called on to take that precious private time and listen to somebody, help somebody, write a letter, answer the phone. It’s such a small thing, but some of you who do that know how draining it is. And what a major sacrifice it seems to be! I’ve worked hard. This is my time. And many times it is and you should treasure it but other times, “OK here’s my one talent. You got

it.” And with the holidays coming and some of the relatives you have to confront, listening to them, major forging of sunglasses.

Another tiny example.... But that’s how we get through our days, by small, good acts. You know, every Sunday the pastor comes out and he welcomes you and then he does a bit of shtick. I think it’s sublime shtick. He says to you, “Turn around to your neighbor and say, ‘Your breath smells good today!’ “ or something of equal theological sophistication. It’s sublime, because I’ve been here six years and, standing back there, I spot certain people who I know are, that particular weekend, going through lacerating suffering, suffering of worries or even sometimes of body. And as I hover back there, I see these people do that. They turn and, with great warmth and geniality, despite their own pain, they share a “Hello.” It’s good stuff. It’s wonderful, because I know it costs some of you to do that. ”Well, it’s a little nothing.....” From such little nothings do we stay in the light.

And, finally, I sometimes mention to you my “buzzard.” That’s this invisible blasted, bleak, blighted buzzard, this invisible critter that comes and bugs me, buzzes at me since I was a child. Some of you have mentioned to me, when you are trying to run away from me and I see you in Safeway, a few of you have mentioned that you get the idea about the buzzard, this kind of dark spirit. And he loves to come with you at Mass. He loves to come to you when you are trying to pray, not all of you, I hope, but some of us. And he loves to bring his dark words, you know, the three big R’s. Past Regrets! Think about that during Mass, not that blowhard up there. Think about past regrets. Or future Ruin, financial and familial ruin that faces you in the future. Or better yet! The holidays are coming. Think of Resentments, and some of those relatives. Brood on this! Let’s have some nice dark forty-five, fifty minutes. To which you will counter, “Hold it! Your three R’s, no! Forget it! Buzz off! Go to Hell, literally.” I’ve got my three C’s. I’ve got a Catholic Community surrounding me, a lot of them with suffering. But they are here. We are here together.” My next C, we got Christ on the cross. He’s on a cross but he is triumphant on this one. And I got Communion where I can talk to Christ who is my light. And, in the words of Theresa of Avila, “Nuestro Senor, Our Lord, is with us.” We are in the light now. Go to Hell, Buzzard! =