

“Waiting”

Homily of December 18, 2005

by Fr. Michael Dibble

In a small town, way upstate New York, there used to be a barber shop with a solitary German barber. When you walked into the barber shop, there was a sign on the wall that met your eye and he would often quote it in his German accent. “We get too soon old and too late smart! You won’t wait long.” We get too soon old and too late smart and you won’t wait long, by which he meant waiting for the haircut. And he was as good as his word. I picked up a magazine and almost immediately the guy who was there ahead of me left and the barber poked me, nudged me. And I looked up, somewhat offended, and he said, “I nudge. You budge.” I thought “Does this guy think he is Goethe or some great German poet?” I nudge. You budge! And he was as good as his word. He kept repeating, “You will not wait. You will not have to wait. You don’t wait long.” For the four years I was there, he was as good as his word. “You won’t wait long.”

The gospel today is about waiting. The wait is almost over. The wait is almost over. The Messiah is coming. The long wait of those Jewish people. It’s almost over. The Messiah is coming. And the Bible scholars, whom I check to make sure I understand contemporary Catholic scholarship, the Bible scholars said (pages and pages, but the main point was this is not a subject for debates about gynecology.) It’s the account of a great divine mystical miracle. Plus, it’s very clear that the identity of Mary’s son is the same as God’s. The child shares God’s identity. It’s right there in that early gospel. And the wait is almost over, as the barber said and as the angel said to Our Lady a long time ago.

We want to think about three waitings, three waitings of you and me. The first is a play. It’s called “Waiting.... Waiting for Godot.” I think it was done in this area fairly recently. And the way the advertisements look in the paper sometimes it is “Waiting for God.... ot.” Before I left New York, it was put on at Lincoln Center with Steve Martin and Bill Murray, as the two main characters. People who went to see “Waiting for Godot,” expecting a rollicking comedy, came out, I am told, looking stunned because “Waiting for Godot” is not a comedy. It’s about waiting and waiting and waiting. A graduate invited me to see his college production of “Waiting for Godot” back in the sixties, and I said, “Oh, I don’t think I want to see that sad, depressing, nihilistic, existential despair, there is no God, no hope....” He said, “Come anyhow!” So I did and the college production of “Waiting for Godot,” and I will try to do it very quickly, the play is not long. It lasts a little over an hour. Two guys, what we call “Knights of the Road” or “Bums” or “Tramps” in rags are standing at different ends of the stage. Those are the characters played by Bill Murray and Steve Martin. And they keep talking about this person, Godot, who

has never shown up. "Where's Godot? We are waiting for Godot..... Godot hasn't come.... Is Godot coming?" At frequent pauses, "Is Godot coming?" And then you could drive a truck through the next pause... Deep, very deep. And on the stage is a tree, a naked tree with its branches like tentacles, and as the play goes on, the light gets dimmer and dimmer and dimmer. And they are waiting for Godot. Halfway through the play, character number three comes on, dragging character number four. Character number three is rather imperious and snobbish, and he is dragging number four man who has a chain around his neck. And the two bums, our heroes, Steve and Bill say, "Oh, isn't that terrible? Look at that poor guy. It's awful with that chain around his neck and he is bleeding. Look! His neck is bleeding with the chain. That's awful, but you and I have to get back to business. We got to keep here, waiting for Godot." And they keep sitting there. And the man three drags man four off with the bloody chain. And at the end of the play, the stage is almost completely dark and they are still waiting and Godot hasn't come and one of the characters throws a rope over the limb of the tree and says, "I think I will kill myself." And the other guy says, "Oh, OK. Better you than me." ... "No, I guess I won't." And they go to opposite ends of the stage and they gaze out, waiting and waiting and waiting. And the stage direction (I bought the play afterwards.) by Samuel Becket, the last stage direction, as the lights go out, is "Neither one moves."

So, the play was over and I turned to my student who is now in college and I said, "Thanks a lot!" He said, "Didn't you get it?" ... "Yes, I got it! Existential! European, nihilistic despair! God doesn't come. If you hope you're a dope!" He said, "Didn't you feel my nudge?" I said, "I certainly did! You misplaced a rib!" because halfway through the play he nudged me. (Again, "nudge." That's how I remember it!) He said, "Godot did come." I said, "He certainly did not. The whole point of Samuel Becket's play is that there's....." "Godot came." This is a freshman in college, teaching the priest who taught him English. This kid said, "Godot came. He came as he came a long time ago in disguise, with a chain around his neck and those two guys just looked at it and said, 'Isn't that awful?' and went on gazing into space waiting for ... Godot. God came, the way he came a long time ago." This is a freshman in college. "In disguise as a baby. Now he comes as a suffering human being." I said, "I don't think Samuel Becket meant that!" And the kid said to me, "No, but that's what I got out of it." We get too soon old and too late smart! Whether Becket intended it or not that Catholic college freshman saw Christ there. He wasn't waiting anymore.

And the second wait was a waiting that some of us priest did up here a couple of weeks ago, waiting for confessions. Father called me and said, "Would you please come and hear the confessions of second-graders?" My heart sank. "Oh, certainly, delighted...." And when I hung up the phone, I turned to my dog who is the recipient of most of my whinings and I said, "Can you imagine! I who heard big league confessions on Wall Street for six years non-stop, corporation confessions, major league confessions, and now I have to go and wait while little second-graders go to confession!" So, some of us priests sat up here, waiting.... I remember saying it out loud to the dog as I left, "I'll wait it out. I'll wait it out." And then, God came again in disguise. Too soon old and too late smart because these kids who, by the way, were beautifully trained, there wasn't any terror or alarm in any of them, and as they came up to make

their confessions and went back to their seats (The parents were sitting on the aisles on the edges of the pews.)..... As the kids came up, I began to divide them into three groups: the shiverers, the smilers, and the swaggerers. The shiverers, with whom I identified immediately, were kind of nervous just because they are young, second-grade, kind of tentative. One or two lost the memory, which I cued, and they went back jaunty. The second group, the smilers, oh, they could have been diplomats in Washington. They came over. They greeted me, formally, decorously. A couple shook my hand, and made their confessions. And the swaggerers (I love the swaggerers because, as with adults often, the swaggerer is filled with terror. And they swagger to disguise their inherent panic.) But these kids weren't filled with terror. The swagger was a kind of "Hullo." A couple of them patted me on the arm, as if to say, "You'll be all right. You'll be all right." But the most delightful part of getting too soon old and too late smart, to me, were the parents because the parents were dotted along at the ends of the aisle, and as each kid came up, many a parent leaned horizontally to see if their kid was going to do it right, if their kid wouldn't faint, wouldn't stutter. And when it was over, I really truly felt, you know, too old, too fast and not smart enough. God comes in disguise. Those little kids were doing exactly why Christ came to Planet Earth. You say you are sorry. You repent. You are forgiven. Redemption. Salvation. All those theological words suddenly, concretely, deliciously in the form of little kids who were Christ, coming to an old priest. Again, Christ in disguise.

And the third and last is about you and me, some of us anyhow getting too old too fast and smart not quickly enough. About Christmas and what I call the "Lunacy Season," about wading through it. Some, fortunately rejoice and enjoy it. Others of us endure it, and I think we need to ask Our Lord personally, during this season, some of us, to give us a nudge so we can budge, a spiritual nudge... A lot of you know that's a very real thing. About three forms of suffering at this time: apathy (I'm so fed up. I'm so tired. I'm so broke. We have been caught in this thing all over again, another Christmas season.) Not all of you, but some of you are bound to feel that way. Extravagance and bills and all those relatives, a kind of apathy that's a spiritual fog. Please God, would you give me one more nudge so I'll budge into the spirit. The second thing for some of us is addiction, addiction to extravagance or booze or the internet. Some of you know what I mean, the addiction of taking somebody you love for granted, taking somebody who loves you and you love, but taking for granted. It's a kind of addiction one gets into. You get too soon old and too late smart. Finally, and I haven't thought about this as I have in the past ten years so much, clinical depression. Well, pull up your bootstraps! Pray a little harder. Your life and spiritual life have nothing to do with that. It's a biochemical sickness, and many people try to hold on and white knuckle it. "Is that a spiritual matter, Father?" Yes! It affects mind and spirit. Jesus came as a human being, to know what we go through. I guess the point I am trying to make is "Do you need medicine? Do people who love you and care about you, are they worried about you?" Or are they saying, in all good will, "Well just be stronger. Use a little will power." Do you need help, medical help, particularly at this season? Maybe a medicine that's not addictive itself will bring you up. A prayer I suggest for some of us, not some of you, some of us is "Lord, if you give me a nudge, I promise to be willing, to be willing to budge to get some help." I didn't stutter. I mean that. If you give me a nudge, I promise to be willing to budge. And then again, Lord, you will come in disguise.