

## “Questions and Answers”

Homily of August 27, 2006

by Fr. Brian Joyce

---

Here we are at the end of August, entering September. It's a great time for questions and answers. The young people have started back to school in our high schools already, our own school last week, and our public schools next week. Our altar servers were arguing before Mass about their homework, and whether their questions and answers were right, or whether the book was right. I think you agreed the book was wrong. That was what I heard you saying. But I also had the report on the high school exit exams for the State of California. This may be some consolation to our high school students. Father Aidan and I looked at a sample of the test and we couldn't figure it out, for the life of us! Not for the life of us!

Jesus asks two biggies, two big questions, in today's gospel: Are you shocked at what I've said to you? Are you shocked by me? And will you also leave me? Are you shocked? My response to the question is "Does anything really shock us anymore?" We watch destruction by earthquake and famine and land mines and air missiles. And only the biggies, the tsunami, Katrina, that might shock us. Otherwise, it's pretty routine. Maybe it's just because it's so common on television. Remember, in the early forties, when the war in the Pacific began, Life Magazine had a single picture of a dead American soldier on one of the Pacific beaches, and it shocked and galvanized the whole nation, that one picture. I think if it were published today, and pictures like it are published, we pretty much say, "Ho-hum. What's new about that?" Maybe it's Jesus that has to shock us. Maybe we should say, "Well, at least Jesus shocks us." Using as a standard of measuring us how we treat the least-valued and least-respected people in our society, the hungry, the homeless, the imprisoned.... Maybe Jesus shocks us or should shock us, asking us to forgive one another seventy times seven. Maybe Jesus should shock us, or when we hear it, we should be shocked that those who live by weapons will certainly die by weapons. Or just watching Jesus ending up on Death Row, legally convicted, properly executed, and as he was through all his life, ending up in bad company. Are you shocked? I think the right answer could be "Maybe we should be."

And, "Will you also leave me?" It was a clear and obvious option for his early followers and the earliest members of the Church, to leave or not to leave. And, if they did, it was very clear who was leaving and who was staying. If you admitted, in those early centuries, to even being a Christian, a follower of Jesus, first, you would have been thrown out of the synagogue. Then, by the Roman government, you would have been considered as an illegal. You would be considered an atheist by society and a criminal under the law. You would have been shunned by your neighbors. And you would have been living in danger of losing your property, losing your limbs

by torture or losing your life by execution, until the year 313.

In the year 313, there was official amnesty. There was an edict of religious tolerance which moved pretty quickly from Christianity being allowed to Christianity becoming the state religion where it not only was accepted, it was expected, and then it was mandatory. So, to become a Christian was legal. It was honorable. It was safe. It was accepted, and for most people, it didn't mean a thing. It was so easy. And, I think we live in a similar situation today. You know, sometimes people say we live in a Christian nation. Well, I'm not at all sure that it is a Christian nation. But, if it is, I'm not at all sure that that's a good thing. ... "Will you also leave me?" Or have you left me? Very often, we can't really tell, even about ourselves. Being a Catholic and being a Christian is so highly acceptable and so taken for granted, we check out one another. I've got a baptismal certificate. I get my kids to religious education. I get myself to Church. I endure Father Joyce's homilies. I put up with Father Dibble's acronyms. I survive Father Aidan's antics. But the question is "Will you also leave me?" Or have you left? And, it's hard to tell because Jesus and Jesus-talk is so much part of our furniture, so much part of our culture.

Remember the saying, "If it were a crime to be a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Well, it's a mixed bag because you remember, not long ago, a book was dedicated to Daniel Berrigan, a great Jesuit priest. And it was dedicated to "Daniel Berrigan, Christian." And he said, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. You left out a key word. It's 'would-be' Christian." We are all would-be Christians. We are all would-be believers. We are trying at it, working at it. We are not perfect. But what's the evidence? Would you also leave me? What's the evidence that we haven't? We use the word "Jesus" and we use the name "Jesus." I don't think that proves anything. I love a poem one of our parishoners wrote. I quote him a lot. He writes great poems, our parishoner. It's called "Unintended Consequences."

One thing can turn me off to your name.  
Not the world, the flesh, or the devil  
But the Reverend on the tube who intones "Jesus, Jesus..."  
Just carrying the name "Jesus" around ain't enough.

Carrying a cross around, I'm not sure that that's enough. I mean it could be costume jewelry, with the underlining "costume." So I am going to list what I think are five signs that test us, whether we have left or not. I wanted to put them in an acronym. How does he do it? I just.... This spells nothing. Five things that spell nothing.... First, I list the active concern for the poor and needy. Matthew 25 sets that as the standard in the criterion, first of all, if we belong to the kingdom because we are people of compassion in our hearts and also in our hands, doing something for people. Number two, forgiveness. I think Jesus calls us to a kind of forgiveness that you do not find in the rural religions. You do not find it in the Mosaic Law. You do not find it in Confucius. You do not find it in Islam. You do not find it in Buddhism. The way Jesus calls us to let go of resentment and bitterness and angry hearts, not easy, but being a people who strive for that, who aim for that. Number three, I didn't know how else to put this because Jesus is so surprising, ready to look at the world upside down. You see, my way of looking at things

and holding onto it and never letting go of it, means I learn nothing. Watching Jesus, he's always turning it over for us. He's always saying "Be careful about your policies and your politics and your opinions and your views because God's wisdom and God's values and God's kingdom look at things differently. So, try to be people who look for that and are willing to let go and listen and change. Fourth, be people who make a difference because following Jesus is not a philosophy. It's not a theory. It's in the flesh. It's not just our opinion or our belief but it 's our life and our work and our ways. It's faith that does something, faith that does justice. And my last one, the fifth one, is have a cheerful heart.

I love the story in the fifties and sixties there was this wonderful religious educator, Christiane Brusselmans, and she gathered all who were working at stopping poverty over to the Netherlands. Among them was a sister who worked full time housing and working with the homeless and with the poor. And they worked hard together for a full week. At the end of it she said, "Before the weekend, we are going to take a day off. We're going to tour the sights around us by bus and then we are going to have a big wonderful dinner together and enjoy." And the sister was furious. "My people are starving. My people are hungry. And I'm going to go out to a big dinner with people who are fighting hunger?" And she refused to go in. They went into the restaurant. She sat out in the bus. And after about twenty minutes, it dawned on her. Where would Jesus be? John the Baptist, that old crank, he'd be out here wearing a hair shirt and eating locusts. Jesus would be at the party. Jesus would be at the party. Jesus says, "Our God is a smiling, laughing, dancing God. We're called to be serious, but not grim. We are called to be committed, but also to be joyful. The voice of God sounds less like "Ssh-h-h-" and more like warm, gentle laughter.

So, those are five things to look for. ....It doesn't spell a darn thing! Active concern for the poor and needy, forgiveness in our lives, ready and willing to look at the world differently, ready and willing to make a difference in the world, and doing it all with a cheerful heart. Are you shocked? I think the answer is "Maybe we should be." Will you leave me? I think the answer is "Not if we can help it! And we are really, really trying to hang in there and to hang out with you." Amen.