

“Bound for Glory”
Homily of November 5, 2006
by Fr. Brian Joyce

That saying of Jesus, to love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves, I think is familiar to Christians everywhere, even though they may not be able to quote the exact passage or chapter and verse. But we know that. One of our parishoners writes poetry. This is his third booklet, and, in it, he has a great poem about that passage. It’s called “Full Disclosure.”

My God I confess that I love you with but part of my mind,
Part of my soul, part of my strength.
And I love my neighbor as I love myself...
Not very well.

I like that. And, you know, this weekend we focus on death and grieving. We focus on death and remembrance. We focus on death and gratitude for life that has gone before us and touched our lives, and gratitude for our faith, that life continues. But Jesus is saying, in that gospel, if we really loved ourselves as we should and our neighbor equally and our God above all things, it would be easier to think about death, to talk about death, to face up to death.

My own memory and my observation is that, as a society and as a Church, we used to be better at it. If you go way back in past centuries, people even planned and composed epitaphs to be written on their tombstones. One of the most famous is found in a cemetery in Ireland a hundred fifty years ago, and repeated in cemeteries all over the world. It is this:

Remember, man, as you pass by
As you are now, so once was I
As I am now
So you will be
Prepare yourself to follow me.

You know, it was copied in a cemetery in the United States and somebody wrote underneath it:

To follow you is not my intent
Until I know which way you went.

People don’t think that deliberately on planning about death today, I don’t think. And generally they don’t write epitaphs, although when I was growing up, one of the priests at St. Anthony’s

Parish in Oakland was Father Warren Woods. Among other things, he was a pilot. He died just a month ago. He shared a plane with Father Dan Cardelli, the pastor of St. Isadore's, and he had an epitaph put on his tombstone that reads:

“Then he geared down and locked.”

And when he asked for it, the salesman wanted to know, “What does it mean?” And he says, “What it means is I am at the end of one trip. I'm off to another.” And the salesman said, “People won't know what that means.” And he just smiled and said, “Pilots will.... Pilots will.”

My memory is that years ago we may have been a little forgetful of resurrection and life, but we were not at all shy or forgetful about death. I remember growing up, as an altar boy, the parish priest usually every day of the week said Mass in black vestments, and a Mass for the dead. Didn't matter whose saint it was or what feast day it was. They always said Mass for the dead, five or six days a week, black vestments, the same single gospel five times during the week. And at funeral masses, they had the “Dies Irae” which people don't even remember the words of anymore. But it remains a slogan for death and gloom. And the priest wore black vestments. There was a black pall put on the casket and there were six candles put out if you had a funeral. They were white candles but the candlesticks were large and black.

One of our ushers, Tom Bates, recalls that when he was young and helping out at Carmel Mission, they had a pudgy old monsignor pastor and he put on the black vestments and he had Tom put out the candles and put out the black pall and he went back to meet the family. He came running back, (whispering) “It's a wedding! ...It's a wedding!”

I don't think we are so good anymore at thinking and talking about death. One mortician has said, “The presence of the dead, even at their own funerals, has become strangely unfashionable and rare.” Now, there are good reasons for that. People choose cremation and memorial masses because of financial reasons, because of the wish of the deceased, because of transportation, because of getting people together for a funeral. There are good reasons for it, but we often end up having a celebration of life to which everybody is invited except the deceased.

Today's scripture tells us, “I will tell you a great mystery about death. Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?” Today's reading tells us that the souls of the just are in the hand of God. What do we believe? What do we know? We know, first of all, that death is real, that death is hard, that we have to be gentle with our feelings and with our memories and we have to be not at all afraid to weep and to mourn. That great spiritual, “O Mary, don't you weep. Don't you mourn. O Mary, don't you weep” is very, very bad advice. We have to allow to let the tears flow. Secondly, we know that the sharing of memories, re-telling of stories about our loved ones who have died, helps a lot. And then there are the regrets we have. “If only I had done this” or “If only I had done that... Shouldn't I have done this?” All those regrets need to be visited briefly and then put away, set aside, put to rest. Our loved ones know better now and they have

moved beyond the regrets, even if we haven't. And finally, we know our faith, our faith. You know, there is a great African-American spiritual that compares death to a train, a train that we all have to travel on, the same train our grandparents and our parents traveled on, that is whistling at the station for all of us. And it only makes one-way trips. But, most of all and best of all, it's bound for glory! This train is bound for glory! This train.... Glory..... Glory. But we would like the details about the destination. and neither that song, nor the Bible, nor the inspired writing of St. Paul, tell us the details about our destination. But what they tell us is "We're bound for glory. It will be glorious."

Here's what we know and here's why. We know, first of all, there are hints from the whole universe that life goes on. Whether it's Hubble or Hawking or Einstein, they remind us that this universe never loses anything. Not a single atom is ever lost, never, never lost, and all, in some mysterious way, bound together, even from the farthest galaxies and stars and planets. Secondly, there are hints, not just from the universe. We know there are hints from our own hearts. From our own hearts, we know this isn't all there is. This isn't all there is. There's got to be more.... hints. Again, our parish poet writes:

I'm three quarters or more along my way,
With little fear and less regret.
My body's DNA spells death.
My Spirit speaks of Home.

My Spirit speaks of Home. There are hints from our hearts, but we know more than that. We know our faith. Our faith says, "It doesn't end here. There's more." And we have proof. For two thousand years, millions of people have experienced personally the presence of the Risen Jesus Christ. That's certainly proof. And we also know that we don't lose our identity after death. Our God knows us by our first names and loves us, and we don't just disappear.

And finally, we know that we will meet again. We will meet where there will be no room for regrets and lots of room for understanding and forgiveness and joy. As we pray in the Mass, "For your faithful people, life is changed, not ended." We are bound for glory.... glorious! Amen.