

Homilies for the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time:

- [Do Whatever He Tells You - Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)
 - [Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle C - Don L. Fischer](#)
-

Do Whatever He Tells You

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Today's readings are remarkably rich. Each is extraordinarily enticing to a preacher. There is the Old Testament prophet promising God's people, so long in exile, a new name: "You shall be called 'My delight is in her' "; for "as bridegroom rejoices over bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (Isa 62:4-5). There is the powerful passage from Paul on charisms, particularly pertinent because it is at once a comfort and a challenge, at once a reminder of gifts beyond compare and a divine dare to use them for the salvation of a world. There is the Gospel, with the first of Jesus' "signs"-an unexpected pointer to God's presence in him: about 150 gallons of water turned into "good wine" (Jn 2:10) to the amazement of Cana's expert cellarer.

But I have yielded to a strange temptation. I shall indeed preach on the Gospel; at least the Gospel will be my springboard. But I shall not talk about the leading man in the episode; I shall focus on the best supporting actress. I know I am treading thin ice. The Catholics among you may squirm in embarrassment, my Protestant brothers and sisters think: Here we go again-from immaculate conception through perpetual virginity to glorious assumption. How gauche can a visiting Roman be?

The point is, I am not concerned today with privileges, with prerogatives. My concern is far more radical: How can you and I live a Christian existence in a world that constantly challenges our values? After seven decades, I can think of no one, save for Jesus, who has answered the question, lived the answer, more simply and more profoundly than his mother. To make sense of this, my scenario has three acts: (1) Mary, (2) another Madonna, (3) you and me.

I

Act I: Mary. Here I ask you to pretend, make believe. Pretend you have never heard of her. Clear your mind of all you know or think or believe about her, and let me tell you a story. Listen to it as if for the very first time.

Long centuries ago, in a town nestled among the hills of Galilee, there lived a teen-age girl. She was perhaps 15, engaged but not yet married, when a message came to her from God. If you are a scholar, you may argue: Was it an interior, spiritual experience, or did an angel from heaven actually descend on Nazareth? It matters little. The point is, God spoke to this girl. He told her that she would conceive a child; this child would be not only a Davidic Messiah but God's own Son. He would not be conceived the way the rest of us are, of human intercourse; the Holy Spirit would effect this in her. As far as we know, the message told her little else. It did not sketch a theology of Trinity, did not say that only the Second Person would take flesh, said nothing about daily life with him

whom she would call Jesus. Nothing about Bethlehem or Calvary, nothing about death and resurrection. We are not even sure how deeply the teenage girl understood the message. What she did understand was the all-important thing: It was God who was speaking, God who was asking something of her, God who wanted her to mother His Son. And at so critical a moment in the story of salvation this teen-ager responded simply: "I am the Lord's handmaid. Let it be with me as you say" (Lk 1:38).

Nine months later, teen-age Mary gave birth to a boy, the long-awaited Messiah. But not where you might expect God's Son to be born: in a capital city, in a palace, in purple and silk. No, in a small town five miles from Jerusalem, in a feeding trough for animals, in ordinary swaddling clothes. Not because Mary liked it that way; only because this was apparently the way the Lord wanted it: "Let it be with me as you say."

Not many months later, this teen-age mother was a refugee. A mighty king was afraid of her child, afraid of a threat to his throne-so fearful that "in a furious rage" he massacred all the male children in and around Bethlehem two years and under (Mt 2:16). Mary and Joseph fled with the child, spirited him to Egypt. Not because she liked to travel; only because the Lord had told her husband: "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt" (Mt 2:13). "Let it be with me as you say."

For almost 30 years this mother lived with her son back in backwater Nazareth. It was a paradoxical period for Mary; for at one and the same time she was shaping him as child, as adolescent, as young man, and discovering slowly who he really was. Slowly indeed, and painfully. Especially slow and painful when Mary and Joseph lost their 12-year-old son, searched for him frantically for three days, found him in the temple asking questions about the Torah, answering the teachers with Duke-like distinction. Mary asked him how he could possibly treat his parents so thoughtlessly. His reply? "Didn't you know that I had to be in my father's house?" (Lk 2:49). Luke tells us "they did not understand what he was saying to them" (v. 50). To understand her runaway child's disobedience, Mary had to learn a good deal more about him. As Simeon had predicted in the same temple 12 years before, "a sword" would "pierce" her (v. 35). She too would have to learn through sorrow and anguish just who this Jesus was, would have to discover that he was destined to be a source of division. Not only in the Israel around her; his obedience to God's word would set him against his very own parents, against her. She would have to learn through the scandal of a continuous cross what it means to murmur "Let it be with me as you say. Once Jesus left her, the cross weighed more heavily each day. It was difficult enough to have him leave, to lose him once and for all to his mission, to the people of Israel. It was doubly difficult, heartbreaking, to see him come back to Nazareth, hear him preach in Nazareth's synagogue, then watch in shock as their own townspeople "filled with fury ... took him to the edge of the cliff on which the town was built, to throw him over it" (Lk 4:28-29). It was doubly difficult to sit at home or stand on the outskirts of the crowd, not only when he fed thousands with "five barley loaves and two fish" (Jn 6:9) or raised a dead Lazarus he loved, but when his enemies shouted he had a devil, when his friends and relatives insisted he was mad. How helpless she must have felt when one of his dear Twelve betrayed him with a kiss and the rest "forsook him and fled" (Mt 26:56), when soldiers whipped him like a dog and pinned him to a tree, when she stood beneath those twin beams and heard him cry to heaven as if forsaken by his Father, when she watched his eyes close mercifully in death, when she cradled him on a bloody hill as once she had rocked him in a lonely stable. How difficult it must have been to really believe that this lifeless flesh would shatter the rock that entombed it and her son would stand before her in resurrectional life. How agonizing it must have been, soul pierced with Calvary's sword, to whisper again what she had first exclaimed in quiet ecstasy: "Let it be with me as you say."

And yet she did. If you read Luke with care, you know she did. For Luke, the disciples of

Jesus are those men and women "who hear the word of God and do it" (Lk 8:21; cf. 11:28). Such, in peerless fashion, was the mother of Jesus. In Luke's accounts, Mary was the first of disciples, the perfect disciple, the model of discipleship. She was the first to hear the gospel, heard it before the birth of Jesus, heard it and said yes. All through Jesus' ministry Luke praises her as one of those who hear the word of God and do it. After Jesus' resurrection Luke places her with the Eleven, with the whole believing community he left behind. "All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Acts 1:14). With them Mary waited and listened, waited for the Holy Spirit to descend at the first fiery Pentecost, waited for the Spirit to speak, so that once again and for ever she might repeat the wondrous words that transformed our world: "Let it be with me as you say."

II

So much for Act I. For anyone who has ears to hear, a remarkable story. Little wonder that Roman Catholicism's Second Vatican Council termed the mother of Jesus type or model of the Church, insisted that where "faith, love, and perfect union with Christ" are concerned, she is what the Church ought to be, what our good Lord expects every Christian to be. But that is Act III. Before we raise that curtain, a short Second Act must intervene.

You see, another comet has flashed across the American sky. Except for professional astronomers, this phenomenon is far more fascinating, ever more enticing, than Halley's Comet. I mean the latest Madonna. Advertising Age calls her "Our Lady of MTV." She is not only a capitalist success story; this Madonna is little short of a religious object, a sacred image, an icon. Spin Magazine purred over her: "She's a shiny heavenly body, a seductive look and a sexy voice. She's sleazy, trashy, cheap and completely out of your price range. Fans dress like her, confide in her, pray to her. She's our lady of rock and roll."

If that doesn't turn you on, our lady of rock and roll likes crucifixes. They dangle from her ears, hang down from her neck onto her waistline. Why? Listen to her very own confession: "Crucifixes are sexy." Why? "Because there's a naked man on them. Crucifixes are something left over from my childhood, like a security blanket. I liked the way they looked and what they symbolized, even before they were fashionable."

This Madonna has a book ready for your bedside table. Its title? The Spirit of the Flesh. It tells you all sorts of basic truths indispensable for a nuclear age: how to dress like Madonna, how to act like Madonna, how to make it in New York like Madonna.

Don't misunderstand me. This is not an assault on contemporary fashions, a Jesuit's jeremiad against lace gloves, fluorescent socks, Madonna buttons. Fads and vogues and crazes we always have with us-and they are not limited to the young, the bad, and the beautiful. What triggers my hiatus hernia, what inflames my esophagus, is not something sheerly external, what you can buy at Neiman-Marcus or the Dope Shop. My distress runs deeper; it has to do with values, with the ideals we hold dear, the convictions we live by. Precisely here is a perennial crisis of civilized societies. Not simply the abstract question, what values do we cherish? More concretely, who models our values? In whom do they take flesh so as to inspire the millions? Mother Teresa or Alexis Colby? South Africa's Botha or Martin Luther King? J.C. or J.R.? Lady Diana or our lady of rock and roll? Who models, who should model, your values and mine?

III

All of which raises the curtain on Act III. Here the characters up front are not quite Madonna I and Madonna II; the action shifts to you and me. Behind us, however, is the neuralgic, nerve tingling question: How serious am I in suggesting that the mother of Jesus should be the model for us sophisticated Christians of the 80s-not only papists but Wesleyans as well?

How serious am I? Dead serious. Simply because the pith and marrow of your Christian existence and mine is summed up in the single sentence of Mary to the servants at Cana: "Do whatever he tells you" (In 2:5). This, we have seen, was the secret, the driving force, of Mary's existence, from Nazareth to Calvary and beyond. She listened to God's word and did it.

You see, Mary is not your model because she tells you how to bring a child into the world without obstetrician or midwife. She does not show you how to escape from tyrannical kings and terrorists. She does not instruct you in "the joy of cooking," does not replace Dr. Spock, has no word for you on domestic dialogue, neat hints on teen-age drug abuse. In fact, if you carry that sort of detailed, minute modeling far enough, Mary will end up the perfect model only for the mother of a single child, and that without benefit of husband! When I say that what Mary is, the Church and every Christian should be, I am reflecting a rich tradition: By God's providence and with God's grace, the mother of Jesus lived to human perfection what God intends for each of us and for the whole Christian community-what God demands of each and all, under peril of being unchristian. And what is that? Simply, that when we hear the word of the Lord, we say yes; that we listen with ears aquiver to Jesus' every whisper-listen and then "do whatever he tells" us.

A simple set of monosyllables, right? Hear the word of God and do it. Simple in sound, terribly difficult in brute reality. Oh, it's easy enough when God's word is your word, when you hear what you hoped to hear, when what God wants is what you would have chosen anyway. It's relatively easy when things are going your way: when academic life is a fantastic 4.0, the Blue Devils have humbled the Tarheels, and the Michelob is flowing freely; when there is sap in your veins and a spring in your step; when your love life is sheer romance and your Honda is purring; when your job is joy, wife or husband a daily miracle, your children shaped by angels, and money grows on trees; when death has taken a holiday.

The problem is, no human life remains quite that idyllic. And so, Christian existence calls for the faith of Mary, her trust, her love. What complicates matters, what makes faith crucial early on, is that, with you as with the mother of Jesus, God does not greet you with a curriculum vitae, with a life script, at birth, or when you turn into a teen, or when you shake the dust of Duke from your feet.

Let me turn uncommonly personal. When God called me to be a Jesuit priest (at least I think I can blame it on God), He did not unfold a full scenario for my century, did not detail the bittersweet of priestly existence. He did not assure me that for decades I would delight in dusting off the early Church Fathers, editing a respected theological journal, teaching in seminary and university, lecturing across the country, preaching to appreciative audiences such as you. He did not tell me that the unbending Church of my baptism would be shaken to its roots in the 60s; that thousands of its ordained, many of them dear friends of mine, would discover their priesthood too difficult to endure; that many fellow Jesuits would feel alienated from the Society they had embraced in their teens; that, as the world around me grew and changed, I would experience confusion and uncertainty, surprises and crosses, anger and fear and resentment. No angel announced to me in advance that basic presuppositions of my youth would have to be agonizingly reappraised on authority in the Church and the ministry of Protestants, on contraception and natural law, on loyalty to Rome and the freedom of the Christian conscience, on "one

true Church." When He called, God told me only enough for me to say yes, only enough for me to put my hand in His and murmur with the mother of His Son "Let it be with me as you say."

And so must it be with you- if your living is to be genuinely Christian. For some of you, what the Lord would like from your life is reasonably clear; for others, His word is still to be spoken. In either case you need the loving faith of 'a teen-age virgin of ancient Nazareth. For, wherever the years take you, whithersoever God calls you, you had better begin with the one indispensable Christian response, the response that transcends denominations, links Catholic and Protestant in a unique unity: "Let it be with me, Lord, as you say." With those giant monosyllables on your lips and in your heart, you will have built your house on the Gospel rock. The rains will fall and the floods come, the winds will blow and beat upon your house, but it will not fall. Building on the rock that is Christ, you will always, by his gracious giving, "do whatever he tells you." Do that and I can promise you one thing without the slightest Roman reservation. "Do whatever he tells you" and you will experience the joy which, Jesus promised, "no one will take from you" (Jn 16:22). In the midst of sin and war, of disease and death, you will echo and reecho the infectious invitation of Eugene O'Neill's Lazarus summoned from the grave:

Laugh with me!
Death is dead!
Fear is no more!
There is only life!
There is only laughter!

From *Lovely in Eyes Not His* © 1988 Paulist Press.

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle C

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 62:1-5; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; John 2:1-11

We have just entered a new liturgical season, the season we call Ordinary Time. During the Christmas season, we focused on the coming of the Christ into the world. This figure Jesus was filled with an awareness, filled with a power and a knowledge that was never experienced before by anyone in this world. Now that we have experienced his coming, we look at the effect that Jesus' coming had on those who were a part of his life while he lived on this earth - his family, his disciples, friends and extended family - all who spent time with him. On this Second Sunday of Ordinary Time, we talk about the effect Jesus had on others by looking at his first miracle in the gospel of John. It is a wonderful story describing how Jesus goes to a wedding in Cana and helps out a group of people who would have been embarrassed to run out of wine. Jesus simply supplies them with something that seemed very essential to this celebration. I love the stories in Scripture because they have so many layers; on one level, we can say, "Well, here is Jesus with a special power. He is in a situation where a need comes up. He answers the need, and he goes on with his life." That's kind of a nice way of imagining this event, but it's so much more exciting to go deeper. What was this all about? Week after week, my greatest longing is to help you see more.

Here is something that I would like to imagine that we are doing together: We are

working very hard to open our eyes, to see what is, to see what God came to do. And we are working to uncover what God is inviting us to participate in, what God is asking us to do. There's a kind of wisdom in the way we choose the readings in our liturgical life as Catholics. From the Lectionary, we usually select a reading from the Old Testament, then the New Testament, then the gospel. The gospel is always last because it is the most important. The gospels are printed in a special book, usually with a special covering. In our case, the covering is made of gold and silver. The book of gospels is given great honor because Jesus is the figure we really focus on. But the order of our readings is also very important to our liturgical celebration. Usually when we look at the Old Testament, we listen to someone speak about what is to come. This is especially true today. It's almost as if the Old Testament prophecies lead us into something that becomes more complete and full in the New Testament. The Old Testament sets the stage, saying, "People have been longing for this." I love imagining that so many of the prophecies are all about the longing found in every human heart. These are the things we long for: A Messiah. A connection. A recognition of a God who is on our side. A God, who even though we fail, is consistently going to be faithful. A God who delights in us. A God who likes us. A God who wants to see us flourish and grow and change and become all we are destined to be. The image of this partnership with God, this image of a God who wants to marry us, is so archetypal. It is so basic to who we are. The Old Testament often gives us an image that helps awakens us to what is basically going on deep inside of us. The gospel gives us the experience of Jesus. The New Testament reading often describes how people were changed by that experience and how life then changed. So often, especially in the letters of Paul, we listen to someone encouraging us to live the way Jesus has taught us. We need to make sure we don't go off on tangents and get confused. One reading speaks about what we are called to. The gospel shows us what Jesus does and how he came to manifest and give us an example of the fulfillment of this promise. The New Testament is always about people struggling to live this life we are called to live.

What I like about those three parts is that they are such an integral aspect of the way in which we grow spiritually: We listen to the words, we long for and need an experience of Jesus (a personal experience) and after that experience comes, we are able to begin to try to live it. We constantly need direction and guidance. That's what the Church is: A group of people trying to figure out who this Christ figure is and trying to recognize the Christ in each of us. Each of us has been anointed. How do we do it? How do we live it? In the readings today, we have the image of a God who says, "I want you to realize that I am for you. I am with you. I am on your side. I really do like who you are and I want to see you grow and develop." That's a wonderful, comforting image for me, and I pray it is for you, too. Let's look at this gospel reading from the perspective of "This is what it looks like when a person, i.e., Jesus, enters into the world fully conscious of this God's presence and this God's power working in his life." That's one of the things we see in Jesus: Someone completely aware, his eyes wide open. He knows the power of God dwelling within him. He knows he has been anointed. The first time Jesus stood up in the temple and read the prophesy of Isaiah talking about this wonderful anointed one who would come into the world to save him, he sits down and then says, "Well, it's happened. I am the fulfillment of that." Or: "This is now happening in your midst." An awesome image of Jesus manifesting the fullness of what all the prophecies are about! In this particular gospel passage, we see Jesus performing his first miracle. I love the way the Scriptures present Jesus: as a human being, as one who is so much like us. He is filled with anointed power. One of the elements I love in the story (and it's never been quite as clear to me as it seems to be now) is the image of Mary being present and encouraging Jesus to do this work. This work seems very simple on the surface. What could be more simple than trying to

save someone embarrassment of running out of something at a party. On a deeper level, we sense Mary, the mother of Jesus, is concerned about this need. I love the way Mary says, "Son, I think you should do this." She is encouraging him to help provide what is needed at the wedding celebration. And Jesus responds by saying, "I don't think I am ready."

I think we have all experienced those situations where we are doing something for the first time. Whether it was the first time we had to give a talk or make a presentation, or the first time we ever had to do something new - there is always that kind of gnawing fear inside of us. I remember the first homily I ever gave as a young priest, and the feeling I had was: "Maybe somebody else could take this one now. I will work a little harder, and then I will do it when I get ready. I'm not quite ready yet." I love that image of Jesus being not quite ready to give in to this extraordinary power flowing through him. This feeling is so human. Mary, absolutely confident that he has the ability, just looks at him and tells others, "Do whatever he tells you to do." She knows he can do it. Then, Jesus takes the ceremonial jars filled with water that were set aside for the purification, for the washing of a ritual that cleansed people so that they would be able to do certain things in their religious world, and he transforms the water into wine. I think what is so beautiful about this first miracle is the ability it has to awaken us to this realization: What is this manifestation of God's power within us, other than something that radically changes everything? Look at the prophecy we have in the first reading. What happens in a human being when it dawns on them that this God is already on their side? Then, all of those rituals of purification so that God would accept us or God would work with us don't seem to have the same power. Jesus is inviting us into something that is so much more valuable, something intoxicating, something extraordinary. I love the image when the head waiter in the gospel story of the wedding at Cana tastes this wine. It's not just ordinary wine; it is extraordinarily delicious.

I love what Jesus is revealing about God's power working through him and inviting us to believe that God's power can work through us. It is delicious. It is wonderful. It is intoxicating. Exciting. The disciples were present at the wedding in Cana. There is no indication in the gospel that they had already rallied around Jesus in terms of really understanding who he was. But they were drawn to him. And they were called by him. They came. What I like about the subtle way in which it all unfolds is that the disciples watching the miracle happen begin to say, "Wait a minute. This is extraordinary stuff. This is very different." And they began to believe in him. It's a wonderful image. Experience after experience that the disciples went through slowly moved these men to believe in Jesus. It was not an easy journey. That gives me hope about my own spiritual journey. I would like to think that I have got it together; I would like to think that thirty-four years of being a priest is enough time to be a believer. And yet, I recognize, if I am really honest with myself, that I continue to grow in my belief and my understanding and my grasp of what Jesus is really inviting us to live. The work is never done. The work is continual. And it works just the way it works for the disciples. It works when we sense the power of Jesus working, moving, and changing us. The reading from St. Paul is a manifestation of his awareness that there is an extraordinary anointing that is our inheritance. Much as Christ was anointed and filled with the divine power of the Father and was able to do extraordinary things like turning water into wine, we are anointed. Christ's transformation of water into wine is a symbol of turning around the whole religious system at the time. Just as Jesus had that experience, we are invited to have the same experience. Paul speaks about the fact that we all participate in this extraordinary gift called the power of God dwelling in humans. But he gives us this really wonderful

cautionary statement that is very comforting: Paul says that no one person carries it all. No one person can do it all. No one person carries all the gifts. What we have to look at (and this really chips away at our way of sometimes evaluating others' value and comparing each other) is our belief that "This one is more important than that one." All that kind of comparison goes out the window when we really understand what Paul is trying to say.

The gifts that Jesus possessed are also given to us. Not all of us possess the same gifts. Each one is given a specific gift, just as God wills. There is no earning of these gifts. It's not that the people who have prayed harder and worked longer and who are older always get the greater gifts. It's nothing that simple or mechanical. God wills; he chooses who to give the gifts to and when the gifts will be manifested. There's something about living in this wonderful, intoxicating world of the Spirit. The power of the Spirit demands a letting go of trying to control it, or of trying to figure it out too literally. It's just the intoxicating awareness of a promise God has made. God is fulfilling this promise that is constantly moving us in the direction of building up the kingdom by each person doing his or her part. Each person receives the gifts of another without competition, without jealousy or envy. It's a difficult balance to establish as a community of faith. This first set of readings marking the beginning of the Ordinary Time of the Year reminds us of the wonderful way that all the gifts that Christ possessed were prophesied. The symbol is that these are the gifts we long for the most. They are the things that are most natural to us. They are the things that demand the experience of seeing this power working - the stories of the Scripture filled with examples - but more exciting to me, more challenging, is watching for those same manifestations in ourselves and in our brothers and sisters. And taking delight in them. Being intoxicated by this wonderful image of a God who wants to be a partner in our lives. By marrying us and being with us, God is engaging us in his work, the work of building the kingdom. This work brings all of us to a place of greater fullness.

© 2001, Don L. Fischer

Printed by Liturgy.com™

© OCP 2003-2009, All Rights Reserved.