

Sir, We Would Like To See Jesus

This is a new collection of thirty-four homilies for different seasons of the year and other public occasions by Walter J. Burghardt, S.J. whose previous collection, *Tell the Next Generation*, received warm and generous praise. All but three of the homilies were delivered on the heights at Georgetown University, which explains the subtitle *Homilies from a Hilltop*—not to be confused, says the author, with the Sermon on the Mount.

To the task of speaking to congregations, Walter Burghardt brings a profound knowledge of theology and patristics. But even more, he brings a warm personality and a compassionate understanding of the real-life problems of human beings. He is a homilist who does not hesitate to share his own anxieties and aspirations.

Other than bringing joy and enlightenment to us readers, this collection can also serve as an instruction to anyone who ever dared step into a pulpit. They show how it's done, concretely. And they show that one of the most important qualities of any preacher is the quality of imagination. As the author says in his Prologue: "The homily, like the liturgy of which it is part and parcel, should proclaim, re-present, make effectively present 'God's wonderful works in the history of salvation'; the mystery of Christ should be 'made present and active within us.' But this is not done by a laundry list of dogmas to be believed, doctrines to be accepted. It is done by imagination."

Here, then, are more than two dozen exercises in imagination that attempt in their own ways to make God present and active within us. Read them to learn how to do likewise, or read them for sheer enjoyment. You will find that the sermon, despite its bad press of late, is not a lost art.

Walter J. Burghardt, S.J. is the editor of *Theological Studies* and theologian-in-residence at Georgetown University. He is the author of many books and has lectured widely throughout the United States.

Walter J. Burghardt, S.J.

Sir, We Would Like To See Jesus

Homilies from a Hilltop

SIR,
WE WOULD LIKE
TO SEE JESUS

Homilies from a Hilltop

WALTER J. BURGHARDT, S.J.
Theologian in Residence
Georgetown University



PAULIST PRESS
New York/Ramsey

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	ix
PROLOGUE	
Does My Drawing Frighten You? Preaching as Imagining	3
ADVENT	
1. DAWN: GETTING THROUGH THE NIGHT	
First Sunday of Advent (A)	17
2. PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD	
Second Sunday of Advent (B)	23
3. SHALL WE LOOK FOR ANOTHER?	
Third Sunday of Advent (A)	29
4. ON TIPTOE OF EXPECTATION	
Third Sunday of Advent (C)	33
LENT	
5. FOR YOUR LENTEN PENANCE, LISTEN	
Second Sunday of Lent (A)	41
6. FORGIVE US AS WE FORGIVE	
Fourth Sunday of Lent (C)	46
7. WHERE IS YOUR GOOD FRIDAY?	
Good Friday	52
EASTER	
8. DO YOU LOVE ME?	
Third Sunday of Easter (C)	59

The Publisher gratefully acknowledges use of excerpts from *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint Exupéry; copyright 1943, 1971 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. Reprinted and reproduced by permission of the publisher.

Drawings by Silvia Ternes.
Cover design by Tim McKeen.

Copyright © 1982 by
Walter J. Baughardt, S.J.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without permission in writing from the Publisher.

Library of Congress
Catalog Card Number: 82-60589

ISBN: 0-8091-0338-9

Published by Paulist Press
545 Island Road, Ramsey, N.J. 07446

Printed and bound in the
United States of America

9. THAT THEY MAY HAVE LIFE Fourth Sunday of Easter (A)	65		
10. LIVE ON IN ME Fifth Sunday of Easter (B)	70		
11. PEACE I LEAVE TO YOU Sixth Sunday of Easter (C)	75		
ORDINARY TIME			
12. CALLED TO BE SAINTS Second Sunday of the Year (A)	83		
13. TO EACH IS GIVEN Second Sunday of the Year (C)	88		
14. BLESSED ARE YOU? Sixth Sunday of the Year (C)	93		
15. WHO TOUCHED ME? Thirteenth Sunday of the Year (B)	99		
16. WHEN HE SAW HIM, HE HAD COMPASSION Fifteenth Sunday of the Year (C)	105		
17. HOW LITTLE WORTHY Twenty-fourth Sunday of the Year (A)	110		
18. I'M THE GREATEST! Twenty-fifth Sunday of the Year (B)	115		
19. PARTYING IN CHRIST Twenty-eighth Sunday of the Year (A)	121	+ + +	
20. I GIVE THEE THANKS, O LORD Twenty-eighth Sunday of the Year (C)	126		
21. EVEN A LONELY VOICE Thirtieth Sunday of the Year (B)	132		
22. ONLY IF YOU RISK Thirty-third Sunday of the Year (A)	137		
23. I NEVER STOP THANKING GOD Thirty-third Sunday of the Year (B)	143		
FEASTS			
24. TOY FOR THEOLOGICANS OR JOY FOR BELIEVERS? Feast of the Holy Trinity (A)	151		
25. YOU ARE WHAT YOU HAVE RECEIVED Feast of Corpus Christi (C)	157		
26. GOD, FREEDOM, CROSS Feast of St. Ignatius Loyola	163		
27. BURIED WITH HIM THROUGH BAPTISM Feast of the Triumph of the Cross	168		
28. THIS IS THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD Feast of the Dedication of St. John Lateran (C)	173		
MEDLEY			
29. YOU ARE WITNESSES Evangelization Day for Bishops, Priests, and Deacons	181		
30. SHOULD ANYONE SAY FOREVER? Wedding Homily 1	186		
31. FOR EVERYTHING WHICH IS YES Wedding Homily 2	189		
32. LORD, IF YOU HAD BEEN HERE Homily for a Mass of the Resurrection	192		
33. BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS Memorial Mass for Mohamed el Sadat	196		
EPILOGUE			
34. LET IT HAPPEN TO ME Fifty Years a Jesuit	203		
NOTES			
	210		

PREFACE

"Now among those who went up
to worship at the feast
were some Greeks .

"So these came to Philip
who was from Bethsaida in Galilee
and said to him :
'Sir, we would like to see Jesus.'"

(Jn 12:20-21)

The surprisingly warm welcome accorded my last book of homilies, *Tell the Next Generation* (Paulist, 1980), has encouraged me to offer this fresh set to the Christian clergy and laity. These differ in several significant ways from the previous collection. First, all the homilies are of recent vintage: from May 1979 to December 1981. Second, all were preached within the context of the liturgy. Third, with only three exceptions the homilies were originally delivered in Dahlgren Chapel on the campus of Georgetown University (hence the subtitle *Homilies from a Hilltop*—not to be confused with the Sermon on the Mount).

Friends who have followed this pilgrim's progress should discover—if not in the homilies themselves, at least in the Prologue—the distance I've traveled in my approach to preaching. Most important, I suggest, is a shift in stress from the concept to the image, stemming from a growing realization that a homilist's primary function is not indoctrination but evocation. The homily at its best evokes a religious response.

I hope, above all, that readers will find between these covers some meaty spiritual reading—not so much material to be preached as stimulus for the spirit, a help for believing Christians to "see Jesus" not with my eyes but with their own.

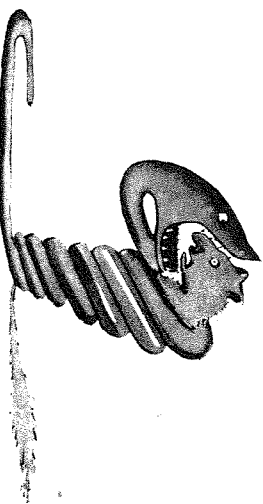
Walter J. Burghardt, S.J.

◆◆
PROLOGUE
◆

DOES MY DRAWING FRIGHTEN YOU? Preaching as Imagining

Do you remember Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince*? I'm thinking specifically of the opening pages:

Once when I was six years old I saw a magnificent picture in a book, called *True Stories from Nature*, about the primeval forest. It was a picture of a boa constrictor in the act of swallowing an animal. Here is a copy of the drawing.



In the book it said: "Boa constrictors swallow their prey whole, without chewing it. After that they are not able to move, and they sleep through the six months that they need for digestion."

I pondered deeply, then, over the adventures of the jungle. And after some work with a colored pencil I succeeded in making my first drawing. My Drawing Number One. It looked like this:

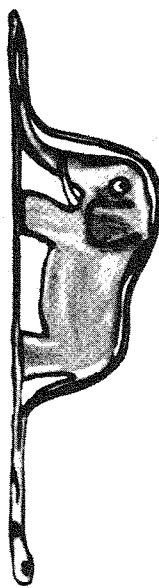


I showed my masterpiece to the grown-ups, and asked them whether the drawing frightened them.

But they answered: "Frighten? Why should any one be frightened by a hat?"

My drawing was not a picture of a hat. It was a picture of a

boa constrictor digesting an elephant. But since the grown-ups were not able to understand it, I made another drawing: I drew the inside of the boa constrictor, so that the grown-ups could see it clearly. They always need to have things explained. My Drawing Number Two looked like this:



The grown-ups' response, this time, was to advise me to lay aside my drawings of boa constrictors, whether from the inside or the outside, and devote myself instead to geography, history, arithmetic and grammar. That is why, at the age of six, I gave up what might have been a magnificent career as a painter. I had been disheartened by the failure of my Drawing Number One and my Drawing Number Two. Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.

So then I chose another profession, and learned to pilot airplanes. I have flown a little over all parts of the world; and it is true that geography has been very useful to me. At a glance I can distinguish China from Arizona. If one gets lost in the night, such knowledge is valuable.

In the course of this life I have had a great many encounters with a great many people who have been concerned with matters of consequence. I have lived a great deal among grown-ups. I have seen them intimately, close at hand. And that hasn't much improved my opinion of them.

Whenever I met one of them who seemed to me at all clear-sighted, I tried the experiment of showing him my Drawing Number One, which I have always kept. I would try to find out, so, if this was a person of true understanding. But, whoever it was, he, or she, would always say:

"That is a hat."

Then I would never talk to that person about boa constrictors, or primeval forests, or stars. I would bring myself down to his level. I would talk to him about bridge, and golf, and politics, and neckties. And the grown-up would be greatly pleased to have met such a sensible man.¹

In recent years I have argued that four problems prevent today's homily from being any better than yesterday's sermon: fear of Sacred Scripture, ignorance of contemporary theology, unawareness of liturgical prayer, and lack of proper preparation.² The list has a lamentable lacuna. I have left out the most serious lack of all: imagination. Without imagination the preacher limps along on one leg. You may have memorized Mark and ransacked Rahner, you may be an expert in things liturgical and put onerous hours into your homily; but if your homily is only a masterpiece of Cartesian clarity, you are in deep trouble. If you are forever explaining things to grownups, drawing recognizable Christian hats, you are hardly a homilist.

To make this outrageous thesis palatable, let me develop it in three stages. First, what are we talking about when we speak of imagination? Second, what has imagination to do with preaching? Third, if imagination is so awfully important, what ought we homilists to do about it?

I

First then, what is this creature we call imagination?³ To begin with, what is imagination *not*? It is not the same thing as fantasy. Fantasy has come to mean the grotesque, the bizarre. That is fantastic which is unreal, irrational, wild, unrestrained. We speak of "pure fantasy": It has no connection with reality. It is imagination run wild, on the loose, unbridled, uncontained.⁴

What is it, then? Imagination is the capacity we have "to make the material an image of the immaterial or spiritual."⁵ It is a creative power. You find it in Rembrandt's self-portraits, in Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, in the odor of a new rose or the flavor of an old wine. You find it in storytellers like C. S. Lewis and Tolkien, in dramatists like Aeschylus and Shakespeare, in poets from Sappho to e. e. cummings.

Now, when I say "capacity," I do not mean a "faculty" like intellect or will. I mean rather a posture of our whole person towards our experience.⁶ It is a way of seeing. It is, as with Castaneda, looking for the holes in the world or listening to the space between sounds. It is a breaking through the obvious, the surface, the superficial, to the reality beneath and beyond. It is the world of wonder and intuition, of amazement and delight, of festivity and play.

Is all this too imaginative to be clear? Then let me sketch, in clear and distinct ideas, some of the ways in which imagination—specifically, religious imagination—comes to expression.

1) A vision. I mean "the emergence either in dream, trance, or ecstasy, of a pattern of images, words, or dreamlike dramas which are experienced then, and upon later reflection, as having revelatory significance."⁷ Examples? Isaiah's vision of the Lord in the temple (Isa 6); Ezekiel's "four living creatures" (Ezek 1); Moses and Elijah appearing to Jesus and the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt 17:1-9); Joan of Arc's "voices"; Teresa of Avila's visions of Christ; St. Margaret Mary's vision of the Sacred Heart.

2) Ritual. The form of ritual is action—action that is public, dramatic, patterned. A group enacts the presence of the sacred and participates in that presence, usually through some combination of dance, chant, sacrifice, or sacrament.⁸

3) Story. I mean a narrative—that is, a constellation of images—that recounts incidents or events. As Sallie TeSelle puts it, "We all love a good story because of the basic narrative quality of human experience: in a sense *any* story is about ourselves, and a good story is good precisely because somehow it rings true to human life. . . . We recognize our pilgrimage from here to there in a good story."⁹ For the religious imagination, three types of stories are particularly important: parable, allegory, and myth.

The parable is a developed simile, usually quite short, in which the narrative is at once fictitious and true to life; from it a moral or spiritual truth is extracted. In a specially forceful way we recognize our pilgrimage in the parables of Jesus: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field" (Mt 13:34). "There was a man who had two sons" (Lk 15:11). "There was a rich man clothed in purple . . . [and] a poor man . . . full of sores" (Lk 16:19-20).

Allegories are developed metaphors prolonged into continuous narratives, in which a series of actions are symbolic of other actions, while the characters often are types or personifications. You remember Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the dream allegory that tells of the journey of Christian and Christiana through "the wilderness of this world" to Zion; Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, that richly imaginative work of moral allegory; Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, a milestone in theological allegory, high festivity in the kingdom of the imagination, the Christian quest in terms a child can understand.

The myth is basically verbal. "It is a narration which conveys the meaning of human existence in relation to its destiny or origin, or the destiny or origin of the social group, nature, or cosmos of which it is a part, as these are grounded and penetrated by the sacred."¹⁰ And so we can speak legitimately of the Creation myth or the Christian myth. For myth is not opposed to fact or to fancy. Its raw material may be fact or it may be fancy, "but its purpose is not to add yet another facet to our squirrels' nest of facts stored against some winter of the mind, nor to create an entertaining fantasy to titillate aesthetic delight." It intends "to narrate the fundamental structure of human being in the world. By the concreteness of its imagery, the universality of its intention, its narrative or story form, the myth evokes the identification and participation of those for whom it functions as revelatory."¹¹

4) Symbol. What symbol means is not easy to say; for even within theology it does not have a univocal sense. Let me define it, with Dulles, as "an externally perceived sign that works mysteriously on the human consciousness so as to suggest more than it can clearly describe or define."¹² Not every sign is a symbol. A mere indicator ("This Way to Windsor") or a conventional sign (a word) is not a symbol. "The symbol is a sign pregnant with a depth of meaning which is evoked rather than explicitly stated."¹³ It might be an artifact: a totem, a crucifix, the brazen serpent. It might be a person or an event: Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, Jesus Christ crucified and risen. It might be words or writings: the Bhagavad Gita, the Old and New Testaments. It might be a story: parable, allegory, myth.

5) The fine arts. I mean painting and poetry, sculpture and architecture, music, dancing, and dramatic art. I mean da Vinci and John Donne, the *Pieta* and Charres, Beethoven's *Massa Solennis*, David whirling and skipping before the Ark of the Covenant, the mystery dramas of the Middle Ages. I mean films.

From all this two significant conclusions emerge. First, imagination is not at odds with knowledge; imagination is a form of cognition. In Whitehead's words, "Imagination is not to be divorced from the facts: it is a way of illuminating the facts."¹⁴ True, it is not a process of reasoning; it is not abstract thought, conceptual analysis, rational demonstration, syllogistic proof. Notre Dame of Paris is not a thesis in theology; Lewis' famous trilogy does not demonstrate the origin of evil; Hopkins is not analyzing God's image in us

when he sings that "Christ plays in ten thousand places./ Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his/[plays] To the Father through the features of men's faces."¹⁵ And still, imaging and imagining is a work of our intellectual nature; through it our spirit reaches the true, the beautiful, and the good.

Second, the imagination does not so much teach as evoke; it calls something forth from me. And so it is often ambiguous; the image can be understood in different ways. Do you remember the reporters who asked Martha Graham, "What does your dance mean?" She replied: "Darlings, if I could tell you, I would not have danced it!" Something is lost when we move from imagining to thinking, from art to conceptual clarity. Not that imagination is arbitrary, that *Swan Lake* or the Infancy Narrative or *Hamlet* or the Transfiguration is whatever anyone wants to make of it, my gut feeling. Hostile to a valid imagination is "the cult of imagination for itself alone; vision, phantasy, ecstasy for their own sakes; creativity, spontaneity on their own, without roots, without tradition, without discipline."¹⁶ Wilder is right: "Inebriation is no substitute for paideta."¹⁷ And still it is true, the image is more open-ended than the concept, less confining, less imprisoning. The image evokes our own imagining.

II

My second question: What has imagination to do with preaching? Not much; just everything. The scholar of mythology Joseph Campbell did not think much of us clergy; he said we have no imagination. Part of the reason is our older education: Imagination was identified with "bad thoughts," and bad thoughts were sexual phantasms, and these we confessed. Moreover, as the Carmelite William McNamara has complained, all through school we were taught to abstract; we were not led to contemplation, to immediate communion with reality, to loving admiration, experiential awareness. We were not taught to simply "see."

To put the problem in vivid relief, let me contrast two theories of preaching. Recently I read the contention of a priest that we should scrap the Vatican II homily and get back to instructional sermons. The critical Catholic problem, he felt, is abysmal Catholic ignorance. Our people, particularly the young, do not know "the faith." A trinitarian God and an incarnate Son, original and actual

sin, one true Church and seven real sacraments, created grace and Uncreated Grace, the Mass as sacrifice and the pope as vicar of Christ, mortal sin and the Ten Commandments, the immorality of birth control and abortion—this is what our faithful must be taught. Vatican II? Why, Catholics don't know Baltimore Catechism One! And especially these days, when elementary Catholic education is vanishing, there is only one viable way to teach: via the Sunday sermon. Give them the dogma, the doctrine, and give it with consummate clarity, with unquestioning certitude.

I cannot agree. I grant that many a Catholic is distressingly ignorant of God's revelation, does not know what God took flesh to tell us. Somehow, somewhere they should learn this. But not *ex professo* in a homily. The homily, like the liturgy of which it is part and parcel, should proclaim, re-present, make effectively present "God's wonderful works in the history of salvation"; "the mystery of Christ" should be "made present and active within us."¹⁸ But this is not done by a laundry list of dogmas to be believed, doctrines to be accepted. It is done by imagination.

Why? Because indoctrination plays upon one faculty of the human person: the intellect's ability to grasp ideas, concepts, propositions. It pays little heed to an old scholastic axiom, "Nothing is present in the intellect that was not previously present in the senses." Our ideas are triggered by sense experience. On the whole, then, the more powerful the sense experience, the more powerfully an idea will take hold. If I want to sell you on Spaghetti Bolognese or Beef Burgundy, I don't hand you a recipe; I let you smell it, taste it, savor it. If I want you to "see" the Holocaust, I won't just say "six million were exterminated"; I'll let you see the gas ovens, the mountains of human bones. It is not enough to tell you the score of Handel's *Messiah*; you must drink it in with your ears. It is one thing to hear "I love you," quite another to experience love's touch.

My thesis? The homily is a fascinating wedding of all those ways in which imagination comes to expression: vision and ritual, symbol and story (parable, allegory, and myth), the fine arts. This is the homily at its best, the homily that makes God's wonderful works come alive, immerses in the mystery, evokes a religious response.

A response—there's the magic word! The homily might be different if the task of the liturgy were simply to *recall* God's saving

works, simply to *remember* the mystery that is Christ. Then I might merely explain lucidly what it all means. But there is more. If the liturgy must make the mystery "present and active within us," a homily should be evocative. I mean, it should help the believer to open up to God speaking now. Not a cold assent to a proposition; rather, "What do you want from me, O Lord?" And the most effective approach to this is not ratiocination, not demonstration; it is imagination.

The evidence for imagination's incomparable power surrounds us. We keep saying "A picture is worth a thousand words." Americans spend billions each year on movies, theatre, concerts. Students study to stereo, skip lectures readily when Bruce Springsteen comes to town. Jesuits too read the comics before the front page, go wild over sports—poetry in motion. Our children's supreme educator, for good or ill, is TV. Even the commercials, that sell products from head to foot essential for human existence, sell us with the greatest array of imaginative talent since the creation story in Genesis 1 and John's vision on Patmos.

And we homilists (so our patient people complain) mount the pulpit or approach the podium with the imagination of a dead fish. "Today, my dear brethren, Holy Mother Church in her age-old wisdom urges us once again to fix our eyes on eternal verities, to scorn passing fancies and the temptations of this world, to recognize in this valley of tears that we have no lasting habitation, that our hearts have been made for God and will be restless until they rest in Him." It recalls what a reviewer once said of Msgr. Ronald Knox, English convert, satirist, master of style: "One can look in vain in his *Sermons* for such unctuous phrases as 'Holy Mother the Church,' which some preachers use as carelessly and frequently as sailors use obscenities to conceal their inability for sustained communication."¹⁹ The same Knox was once twitted by a bishop for reading his sermons from a prepared text—twitted a bit too long. At last Knox said: "Ah yes, Your Grace, I recognize the validity of your observations. I sensed it one day when I was about to mount the pulpit with my manuscript in my hand and I heard a gentleman in the first pew whisper to his wife, 'My God, another bloody pastoral!'"

The homily is an instrument; God uses it to speak to the soul. *God* speaks. The external word is indeed mine; but if God is to speak, my word has to open the way, not close off all avenues save

mine. Not, therefore, "When you go back to your kitchen, this is what you must do." Rather, so artistic a presentation of a message that different people hear from God what they need to hear. Like a great piece of music—Bach's church cantatas, full of symbolism, allusion, and word painting in the context of the Lutheran service—the homily will have different meanings for different listeners, will touch them not where I live but where they live, where God wants them to live.

Here imagination is indispensable. The image is more open-ended than the concept; the image evokes imagining. This is not indifference: From my homily you should not emerge with a unitarian God, an Arian Christ, abortion on demand. No; I presume, or insinuate, or proclaim the tradition. Remember Wilder: "Inebriation is no substitute for *paidéia*." And still I am not so much exposing as evoking, not so much imposing on the ignorant as revealed truth with specific applications as drawing the already faithful into the mystery of Christ in such a way that *they* can apply it, can say yes to a living God speaking now. The priest, Urban Holmes insists, is "one who incites people to imagine."²⁰

III

My third question: If imagination is so awfully important, what ought we homilists to do about it? When I first approached this point, I fumbled long and wearily with specifics: I wanted, you see, to give you concrete applications! Read storytelling theologian John Shea; tune in on the apocalyptic vision of the TV preachers; immerse yourself in Lewis and Tolkien; shift your language from the abstract to the concrete; remember that the verb carries the action; listen to the flowers.

I do not retract all that; those suggestions could be of help. But suddenly I realized that we have a more basic need. What Catholic homilists require is a conversion; we need fresh insight into our priesthood. I can best illustrate this from my own life. Here I wed three elements: the "I," the revelation, the people.

First, I who communicate. For the first half of my priestly life, I was the most objective of human beings. Objectivity had been rooted in me—by scholastic philosophy, by a theology that lived off magisterial affirmations, by spiritual masters who stressed reason and will, suspected emotion and experience, despite St. Ignatius'

sense-saturated Spiritual Exercises. The subjective had illegitimate parents: Protestantism and Modernism. At the altar, then, and behind the confessional screen, in teaching and preaching, in lecturing and counseling, the I was submerged, that Christ alone might appear. I rarely said "I," that only the truth might transpire. Until one day in the early sixties, when I had given a remarkably lucid response to a young lady's religious question. She looked at me a moment, then said: "And what do *you* think?" It was a harrowing moment. I am not an ecclesiastical computer, spewing forth the data fed me. I too am a symbol, a sign that says more than my words can express. In the pulpit I may well be the most powerful image of all.

Second, the revelation we communicate. How was it initially communicated? In my more callow days we had no problem: Divine revelation consists of truths set forth in the Bible and in authoritative Church pronouncements. God has embodied His revelation in propositional language so that it can claim our unswerving assent. Now I do not deny that revelation can be mediated through true propositions. I simply point out that a fresh vision permeates our century, permeates me: Revelation is symbolic disclosure.²¹ Revelation is always mediated through an experience in the world—specifically, through symbol. I have no room to argue this here; let me illustrate it by one example, a key theme in the New Testament: the kingdom of God.

As Norman Perrin points out, the "Kingdom of God" in the preaching of Jesus is not a clear concept or idea with a single, univocal significance. Rather, it is a symbol that "can represent or evoke a whole range or series of conceptions or ideas" and thus bring the hearer into the very reality borne by the preaching of Jesus. Perrin profusely illustrates the symbolic nature of this language as found in the proverbial sayings of Jesus, in the Lord's Prayer, and especially in the Gospel parables. The constant factor in these diverse materials, he maintains, is the symbol of the kingdom of God, which had for Jewish audiences the power to evoke the faith-experience of God's dramatic action on behalf of His people and to elicit an appropriate response. To seek to pin down some one definite meaning of the term "kingdom of God," according to Perrin, would be to overlook the polysymic character of symbolic communication.²²

This does not mean that revelation cannot be translated into objective doctrinal statements. It means that our biblical symbols, from

the theophanies of Sinai through the cross of Christ to the descent of the Spirit, are too rich to be imprisoned in any single conception. Moreover, the knowledge that symbols give is not cold, abstract information; it is "participatory knowledge." A symbol is an environment I inhabit, live in, the way I live in my body; I recognize myself within the universe of meaning and value it opens up to me.²³ And because revelation is this sort of truth, it can transform us, initiate us into a saving relationship with God; it can radically influence our commitments and our behavior; and it can give us insight into mysteries reason cannot fathom.

Third, the people with whom we communicate. Early on, I look for granted that they came to the liturgy to learn, that the sheep needed to be led. The assumption is clear in an address I gave two decades ago to the Catholic Homiletic Society on preaching dogma.²⁴ I do not disown the address, but it was one-sided: How do I preach the truth attractively? I hardly mentioned the people "out there." The responsibility, as far as I can reconstruct it, was to give ear to my dear message and be seduced by its beauty. Late in life I have begun to grasp why some pulpits confront the preacher graphically with the request of the Greeks to Philip: "Sir, we would like to see Jesus" (Jn 12:21). How simple a request . . . and how stunning! Here is our burden and our joy: to help believing Christians to see Jesus—not with our eyes but with their own.

Given fresh insight, a kind of conversion, on these three levels—a homilist more open and free, a revelation charged with symbols, a people wanting to see Jesus—you will inevitably preach imaginatively, prepare imaginatively. First, you will find yourself inescapably part and parcel of your homily. What you preach will strike sparks because *you* are aflame with it. The word you speak will say so much more than the dictionary definition because that word has taken flesh in you. You have been captured by a dream, enraptured by a vision; you have your own "voices"; the world of the senses excites you, like Teresa of Avila, you can be ravished by a rose. You will feel ceaselessly reborn, thank God each dawn with e. e. cummings "for most this amazing day . . . for everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes."²⁵

Second, God's word will never again seem "stale, flat, and unprofitable." For you will have discovered, with the Benedictine liturgiologist Nathan Mitchell, that "every symbol deals with a new discovery and every symbol is an open-ended action, not a closed-

off object. By engaging in symbols, by inhabiting their environment, [you will] discover new horizons for life, new values and motivation."²⁶ The biblical symbols will overwhelm you with their many-splendored possibilities, their refusal to be imprisoned in a formula, their openness to fresh imaginings. You may even start saying, not "The kingdom of heaven is . . ." but "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ."

Third, once you realize that your people want not catechesis or theology but only to see Jesus, you are forced to find ways to satisfy their thirst. Rome and Rahner are only a foundation. For all their objective importance, neither John Paul's encyclical *Redemptor hominis* nor the "supernatural existential" is calculated to turn the faithful on. And so, like it or not, you will learn to dream dreams and see visions, retell the parables of Jesus in a modern idiom. You will create your own world of Christian imaging, learn not only to pray but to play, look for the holes in the world, listen to the space between sounds.

The alternative is terrifying. Without imagination we homilists are no more than pried pipers, and just as dangerous as the original. Like the Piper of Hamelin, we dress in a suit of many colors, pipe our strange melody, and many of the children follow us. But where do they end up? Where the children of Hamelin ended up. Look again at Saint-Exupéry's Drawing Number One:



Doesn't it frighten you? You may answer: "Frighten? Why should anyone be frightened by a hat?" But my drawing is not the picture of a hat. It is a cave, a cave packed with children, a closed-up cave, a cave with no air, no exit, no freedom. Doesn't *that* frighten you?



God you meet you will be able to say in all honesty and Christlike humor: "You know, you're the greatest!"

Dahlgren Chapel
Georgetown University
September 23, 1979

19

PARTYING IN CHRIST

Twenty-eighth Sunday of the Year (A)

- *Isaiah 25:6-10*
- *Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20*
- *Matthew 22:1-14*

Once again the liturgy confronts us with a parable (Mt 22:1-14). And once again there is much to puzzle us, irritate us, make us feel that the whole thing is unreal. Royal wedding invitations to which *all* the invited respond "no." When the king insists, his messengers are killed. The king retaliates: His troops destroy the murderers and burn their city. To fill the dining room, the king pulls in people off the streets, the nice and the not-so-nice. One poor fellow doesn't have a wedding garment; out he goes on his tush. And the whole thing ends with a vague, disturbing warning: "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Mt 22:14). Couldn't the master of parables do better than that?

Before you give up an undigestible banquet for an edible brunch, let me try to spice up the king's dinner. With three courses, of course. First, an appetizer from the Jewish world, to tease your taste. Second, the main dish, quite international—really what the king's dinner is all about. Third, a local dessert, prepared especially for you—possibly a bit tart for some Christian tastes.

I

First, the appetizer. Something a bit startling: The parable you have just heard is really two parables.¹ The first parable (vv. 1-10) ends with the wedding hall filled; and so it ends on a happy note,

with the rabble, the ragtag, the riffraff hoisting one to the king and singing the equivalent of "For he's a jolly good fellow." That's the parable of the Great Banquet or Wedding Feast. The second parable is the parable of the Guest without a Wedding Garment, a fellow from the streets who did not find the time or take the trouble to wash his clothes clean. You find this only in Matthew, not in Luke's version (Lk 14:16-24). Luke ends with the house about to be filled with outcasts and underprivileged; the "beautiful people" originally invited have not been killed, but they are not to taste of the banquet. End of parable.

Now why did Matthew take another parable of Jesus, an independent parable, the case of the rejected guest, and insert it here? For an appetizer, let me simply say this. Once the parable of the Great Banquet was applied to the Christian community, it ran the risk of being misunderstood. Did the life of the community have nothing to say to the sinner? Did Jesus' invitation not call for change, for conversion, for clean clothes? Were the baptized free of moral responsibility? The evil were as welcome as the good, and could stay evil? It doesn't matter whether you're good or evil—just eat up? No. The second parable told the community: You don't have to buy a tux, but whatever you wear has to be washed, has to be clean. You have to change.

II

Enough of the appetizer. Now for the main course—cuisine international. What is the king's dinner all about? In a single word, salvation—the salvation of the world. But to grasp what that means, you have to understand the situation in which Matthew wrote his Gospel. Don't think of Matthew lounging at the Sea of Galilee, trying to put down exactly what Jesus had said. No. He was writing for a community in transition, a community in process of change.² They were largely Jewish-Christians, Jews converted to Christ. It was about the year 85, somewhere in Palestine or Syria. The community was confused, in tension and conflict, bewildered by false prophets. They had been profoundly affected by the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans. Rooted in Jewish tradition, they had to ask themselves: In the context of post-war Judaism, what does it mean to be a Christian? Are we to continue as a special sect within Judaism? Who are we? They were

being persecuted by non-Jews; there was in-house betrayal and hatred; widespread wickedness was causing love to grow cold.

In response to all this, Matthew retold the story of Jesus from his conception till after his resurrection. He stressed four themes for his community. (1) Though originally sent to Israel, you must give yourselves to the wider Gentile mission. (2) You are no longer a sect within Judaism; you have a separate identity. (3) Forgive and love one another, for your mission will fail if you cannot live with your own divisions. (4) When Christ returns, he will judge not only you but the Gentiles to whom you are sent.

Within this historical situation today's parable makes sense. Jesus' own parable was shorter and simpler. He was taking aim only at his opponents and critics: You spurned the invitation to salvation, and so God has called the publicans and sinners. Matthew applies it to the whole mystery of Jews and Gentiles. Now it becomes an allegory of salvation, an outline of God's plan for redemption, from the appearance of the prophets, through the fall of Jerusalem, to the Last Judgment.

The feast, the great evening banquet, is salvation. The first servants sent out are the Old Testament prophets, those men who were called by God to speak in His name, to say "Thus says Yahweh." The guests first invited to the marriage feast of Yahweh's Son are the people of Israel. They reject His call. The second group of messengers are the apostles and missionaries sent by God to Israel. Their message too is rejected; some of them are put to death. The city the king burns is Jerusalem, destroyed in 70. The mission to the streets is God's invitation to the Gentiles: All peoples are now called to the feast of salvation. The entry into the wedding hall is baptism, entry into the community of salvation. The inspection of the guests by the king is the Last Judgment. The "outer darkness" is hell.

III

Now that, my friends, is a very heavy meal. There is indeed much to nourish you there: God's saving care for all of us from ages back. But there is also much to give you heartburn: It seems awfully harsh on the Jews. For easier Christian digestion, therefore, I suggest a local dessert, my own recipe, even though it may prove a trifle tart.

The name of the dish is common enough: community. Remember Matthew's problem? His community was torn: infighting, lack of love, especially the agonizing question of Christian identity: Who are we? Now the world-wide community called Catholic has for two decades been experiencing parallel problems, and many of our local communities are dreadfully divided. At times we Catholic cats claw at one another with a savagery that must make Christ weep. The Eucharist that above all else should make us one in love divides us in cordial dislike. Doctrinally, thanks to theologians in and out of residence, it seems as if everything Catholic is up for grabs. The identity tags are all but gone: novenas on Monday and fish on Friday, the Rosary and Benediction, the wimple and the Roman collar—even confession. Who are we?

A homily is not a dissertation, and so that question will not be argued here. But much that Matthew said to his community he would surely adapt to our situation. First, you do have an identity, a Catholic identity. In part, it is an identity you share with other Christians. With them, you confess Jesus as Lord and Savior; like them, you are united to the Father and to one another through Christ in the Spirit. In part, you are different; for you express your commitment to Christ through a body of beliefs, a system of sacraments, an order of authority that other Christians cannot totally share. Despite our theological battles "religiously" reported in *Time* and *Newsweek*, you should know, and I sense that you do experience, what it means to be a Catholic Christian.³

Second, Matthew would say: You have a wider mission than to your own Dahlgren community. The danger in any well-knit group—academic, military, political, social, spiritual—is narcissism: Like the beautiful youth Narcissus in Greek mythology, you risk falling in love with your own reflection. It is indeed an impressive image you project: warm, open, generous, accepting, enthusiastic. You are a community of love, alive with and for one another. In this context you have felt compelled to ask: Is your mission locked into this Georgetown quadrangle? Matthew would answer: Absolutely not! The world is your parish. Where precisely? Thailand or 14th Street? Appalachia or your office? The corridor you live on or the streets you walk? No homilist knows. The encouraging thing is that as a community we have begun to feel uneasy; we sense that, grateful as we are for all our Dahlgren blessings, we

may be wrapping them up in Georgetown napkins and clutching them tightly to our happy little bodies.

Third, Matthew would repeat: Whatever your mission is, it will fail if you cannot live with your divisions. The Catholic Church is hurting. Not for the first time; and only those ignorant of history think of today as the nadir, the pits, of Catholic existence. But we do hurt; countless divisions rend us. The point is, the hurts that tear us must be made redemptive. Whether in our tiny chapel or in our diocese (yes, *our* diocese) or in the Church at large, we all have wounds to bind—our own and others': fears and tears, frustration and anger, loneliness and lovelessness, bitterness and envy, even the frightful feeling that in this royal hall I can no longer taste the banquet of salvation.

In a few moments we shall receive one of our own dear young friends into full communion with the Catholic Church, full communion with our community. What she has tasted of the King's dinner she apparently likes; her reaction to the rest of the feast I dare not predict. Much depends on the rest of the guests—how well, how lovingly, how joyfully you and I party in Christ.

Dahlgren Chapel
Georgetown University
October 11, 1981