

Homily, 32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007  
Father Nathan Reesman, St. Mary's Visitation Parish  
JMJ/PJP II+

*On Heaven, Celibacy, and Chocolate Sundaes*

There is not much in the modern era that television and Hollywood haven't ruined or distorted, and this is especially true when it comes to matters of doctrine. Chief among the religious notions that film has severely messed-up is the idea of heaven, to the point where most of us, even Christians, walk around with wildly inaccurate notions about what heaven actually is.

Consider the movie "Field of Dreams." I'm sure you're familiar with it- the story line revolves around the idea that a bunch of players from the Chicago White Sox, from ages past (as in- they're all dead) show up and start playing ball in Kevin Costner's backyard as if they are living still. And at one point there is the famous exchange where one of the players asks Costner: "Is this heaven?" And Costner responds: "No- it's Iowa."

Sure. Now, I've been to Iowa. And Iowa is many things, but one thing that I can say it definitely is not, is heaven. Period.

And then there was the movie "Ghost." You remember that one? In it we discover that the afterlife consists of a bunch of dead people jumping into the bodies of the living, and, of all people, only Whoopi Goldberg can step across the thin boundary between dead and living so that the two worlds can communicate with each other through her. Do I even need to comment on the absurdity of that?

We think heaven is a bunch of clouds, or we think angels look like Michael Landon, or we think that God looks like an old grandpa with a beard, or worse (or better depending upon your perspective) like Morgan Freeman from the movie "Bruce Almighty."

All of this is non-sense, but it does color how we think- the media has a way of seeping into our mushy little skulls.

And, sadly enough, priests haven't helped either when it comes to messing up the truth about heaven and the afterlife. Some of them retreat into the whole "well, it's a mystery so who knows" argument. Others say very strange things. I remember a homily from when I was in High School, probably from this same Sunday of the year, when a priest explained that heaven is really like a huge chocolate sundae with sprinkles and a cherry on top. I kidd you not. Even in high school, unintelligent person that I was, I knew enough to figure out that that was ridiculous. And besides, if you're lactose intolerant (which I'm not, but if you are) that's not heaven- it's hell.

So- you get the point. It's not a small point though. November is the time when we think in a particular way on the dead. And the gospel for today's Mass, along with the first reading, are on the topic of the after-life and heaven.

And the fact is, if we don't understand correctly what heaven truly is, then we're going to have the wrong attitude about how to live in this short, passing life of right now.

Directly linked to our misunderstandings of death, afterlife, heaven, etc, is our tendency to live as though this life is all that there is- to live as though there is no resurrection- in a certain sense, making the same mistake the Sadducees made in today's Gospel.

The alternative is to live like the faithful Jews in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Book of Maccabees- today's first reading. They were ready to die and forsake this life because they understood this world is temporary. Because they knew that there are far worse things than suffering and death, namely, apostasy- denying your faith in the face of danger.

So, in the interests of promoting right-living through right-understanding, allow me for a few minutes to do a bit of catechesis on what heaven actually is. Think of this as "Myth Busters" on the subject of heaven (some TV shows aren't all bad).

For one: Heaven is not a place. It is a state of being- a state of union and communion. We, all of us, were created to enter into a perfect, loving relationship with the Father. That doesn't happen in this life- here is only the beginning of that. Heaven is the perfect, total, complete, unimpeded state of friendship with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Which means (point two): that such a union only happens through and with Jesus. HE IS HEAVEN. Jesus is the perfect joining of humanity with God in his own person; heaven is the perfect joining of humanity with God lived out through our persons; therefore, entering into communion and friendship with Jesus is the same as entering into the communion of heaven. Somehow, all of the saving on this planet has to be done through Jesus- there is no other way.

Related point: in heaven, we do not lose our personal identity. It is still us. With a memory and a knowledge and a history and a will and an intellect, etc, etc. We do not simply fade into nothing like a drop of water hitting the ocean- that would be the termination of who we are and God does not want that.

Which means (point four): that we cannot impose our idea of heaven and salvation onto people in other religions, especially the religions of the East (Asia). In other words, you cannot be both a Hindu and a Catholic for example. For them, ultimate existence- the goal- is to fade into nothingness, to lose individuality. For us Christians, salvation is PERFECT individuality- one of relationships. On this most important point, the two religions are directly opposed so we can't go around trying to mix the two together.

Fifth point: we will not be complete in heaven without our bodies. It's not like our souls are just floating around up there somewhere. We believe as Christians in the resurrection of the body. I've preached on this already several times, especially on August 15<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of the Assumption of Mary. Our cemeteries are temporary homes- and when Christ comes again to judge the living and the dead, we will rise again in glory. Our souls, even

in heaven, long for our bodies- they are not complete without them- which means heaven would be incomplete without them. In heaven, we will have our bodies back.

Another point: in heaven, we will all KNOW everyone else intimately. We will know the Father in the Son through the Holy Spirit and through that union, we will know everything about everyone who has ever lived- ever. Imagine how closely you know your spouse or your closest friend, and then think of that kind of intimacy with the whole planet, one person at a time. That would take an eternity wouldn't it. But- that is the communion of heaven that we were all created for- a communion that only exists imperfectly here.

Point seven: it is not guaranteed that everyone is going to heaven. Jesus says this in the Gospels: "Not everyone who cries 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven." Or then there is this one from the book of Revelation: "Nothing- nothing- unclean or impure shall enter here- enter into heaven." Even though opinion surveys seem to suggest that something like 80 percent of Americans believe in heaven and think they are going there, these two little quotes suggest otherwise. This is why as Catholics we have a developed understanding of Purgatory- of the fact that even after we die, God chooses to purify us and clean us up so that we can meet him face to face. It's a great doctrine of mercy on his part because almost no one dies ready to meet him- no one dies "clean." Without purgatory, no one, me included, would be getting into heaven. God knows he has to help us get ready to meet him and that's what he chooses to do.

And the final point, and the most important one for the rest of the homily is this: only heaven- only the communion and friendship with the Trinity, will satisfy all of our longings, needs, and wants. **THIS LIFE CANNOT DO THAT.** Ever.

But, we often live as though it can- as though we're trying to find satisfaction here in the passing stuff of the world.

We all have hungers- hungers to belong, to be loved, for intimacy, to be fed, to be noticed, to be beautiful, to be forgiven, to be at peace. Every appetite we have- for food, for sex, for beauty, truth, peace, companionship, etc, etc- every appetite- they are all a longing for one thing only- for heaven. Period. That is all that will satisfy them. That's how we were made.

We live as though there is no resurrection, as though heaven is Iowa or a chocolate sundae or whatever, whenever we keep trying to find total happiness **IN THIS WORLD.** We do it **ALL THE TIME- OUR ENTIRE CULTURE IS BUILT ON THIS FALSE PURSUIT.**

Think about it. Here are a few examples of how a false idea of heaven leads to a false pursuit of it here:

Our computers are never fast enough, so we have to always buy new ones. Our houses are never large enough. We think we NEED another dress, piece of jewelry, pair of shoes, etc, even though we know that we already have 200 of them at home in the closet.

Our food portions are growing larger, and so is the size of our televisions. Our medical care, which is the best in the world, is never good enough because, we still end up dying. Imagine that! And we can't live with the fact that we're going to die so we demand better and better care which creates the expensive mess of a medical system we are currently stuck with.

Our marriages get boring, our kids don't win enough spelling bees or tennis matches for our satisfaction. Our appearance isn't youthful enough. The alcohol or drugs or pornography can't dull the pain enough so we just consume more of it. Reality is not interesting enough so, we create movies, TV shows and computer games to be more and more astounding just to hold our attention.

In short: WE'RE BORED! We are depressed! Un-fulfilled! Un-happy! Over-medicated!

BECAUSE- we are trying to find heaven- here and now. And we can't. Ever. Period. All of the relationships and the stuff of this passing life are fine AS LONG AS they are kept in the proper perspective. They can only satisfy to the extent that they lead us to God. And even then, they can only satisfy so far- there will always be an ache and a hunger that is not filled- an ache that only heaven can fill.

Now- all of this should raise several things for our consideration. I'll toss out a couple points. If we truly believed heaven is the union of the whole human family with the Trinity, and if we really lived as though getting there is all that matters, more than anything else, then we'd be content with a different kind of life here and now.

We'd be more willing to go without. We'd stop medicating ourselves with useless stuff. We'd pray and fast and serve and give a whole lot more than we do.

Prayer, and fasting, and alms-giving and service- all of those things teach us to deny the passing stuff of this life and raise our eyes instead to heaven- they help us keep our focus- they remind us to sit and live in the ache of the now because we KNOW that only heaven will fill our hungry hearts.

Which brings me to the final point for today (yes this rant will end). In the Gospel today, Jesus launches into this interesting little discussion about marriage and heaven. This is one of the handful of New Testament passages that we point to as Catholics to try and explain the importance of celibacy for priests.

Explaining celibacy would require a whole collection of homilies (even longer than this one), but, for the moment, in light of everything else I've said, it's enough to emphasize this:

The central reason why I give up a wife, and a family, and children, and a sense of heritage and offspring and legacy, etc, etc, is because I'm trying to show the world that ONLY HEAVEN satisfies. We, all of us, are not married in heaven to one person. We are married to EVERYONE and to God- all at once. That goes back to the whole getting to know everyone intimately thing I mentioned earlier. That's the marriage feast of heaven. Too much love for just one partner.

As awesome as married life and married fatherhood is, celibacy teaches us that the marriage of heaven, that marriage with God for eternity, is much greater.

I live this life of celibacy as a priest for the sake of your salvation- to try and get you to raise your eyes to heaven so that you won't forget that this life is only temporary. I live it to try and save you from the mistaken mindset that this world is all that we have.

I'd be lying to you if I said that I never find this discipline, that I freely chose and was called to by God, to be a tremendous and sometimes painful sacrifice.

But that's the point. Only heaven, only total union with God in heaven, is worth sacrificing everything for, even something as beautiful and amazing as marriage.

So my friends- always, always live and die as people destined for communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit- that's what heaven is. If we can't sacrifice for heaven now, then we are not going to inherit it later- God is not going to force on us something we've never demonstrated we really wanted.

AND: if we don't truly understand what heaven is, if we don't learn our doctrines, if we don't learn our true created nature and destiny, then we are not going to sacrifice for it.

There is no way I would ever give up a wife and kids so that I could spend eternity hanging out with Morgan Freeman sitting on a huge chocolate sundae. No way. But, I would sacrifice that, and more, to see God face to face and to enter into marriage with the whole community of persons that is humanity. Forever.

Thank God there is more to existence than this passing world. Friends- let us all live, and die, each day, as though we truly believe this. Let's all live and die for heaven.