

JVC: NW 2nd Annual Benefit Dinner, Making Connections: Past, Present and into the Future
Liturgy at St. Bridget's Church, Seattle
May 19, 2007

Fr. Jack Morris, SJ Homily

Fifty years ago next month I was on my way from philosophy studies in Spokane to Copper Valley School, Glenallen, Alaska (are there Copper Valley JVs here tonight?) to join fellow scholastic, Tom Gallagher and those first volunteers. This coming October I'll be 80 years old--- I'm still trying to figure out what I'll do when I grow up.....I'm so very pleased to be here tonight.

I chose for my homily two texts that I consider central to my own journey as a Jesuit, as a human being. Further, I believe these texts clarify and sum up what the Jesuit Volunteer Corps experience was, and is, all about, and what the experience has meant now for thousands like ourselves. To volunteer is to say yes, and my hope is that these texts and our time together, will help you to continue the quest we're all on as JVC alumni.

In the gospel text we see that Jesus had moved beyond preaching and teaching the crowds. He's into an intense instruction period for his close followers as they begin that final journey to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. He's leading them to the heart of things with two questions: "Who do people say that I am?" This is right at the beginning of the journey. They respond--he's John the Baptist, or one of the prophets.

Then Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Like a Buddhist koan--a thought that stops thought. Like an arrow or a harpoon, it pins one to the wall because implicit in the question is "Who am I?" What is human existence all about? Jesus question, it's not a question to be answered; it's about listening and pondering. It's about that existential wrestling with the meaning of life, its apparent absurdity, and death now today in 2007.

Jesus' question is the most important in the whole of the New Testament. It is the question that everything else in the New Testament leans into. It is double edged--it's about Jesus, but more incisively it asks "Who am I.?" What am I made of, and what for? The jvc year, or years, was precisely about the gritty question of personal identity. The jvc experience woke us up, shook us down, and told us who we were at that time in our journey. T.S. Eliot gets to the matter with these words, "We shall never cease from exploring, and the end of all exploration is to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." Jesus' question is brilliant--- for a Christian it's there to greet us every morning like the rising sun. The question becomes my essential quest. Who am I, how am I spending the coins and big bills of my life? Am I giving birth? It's deeper than dogma, religion, and church. It's about my very identity, what I experience, what I feel, how I hurt, how I forgive, what I laugh at, and how I establish communion with others. It's about taking new risks of the spirit each day. About what I give away, and what makes my heart sing.

The JVC values repeat this same octave of questions in either a higher or lower key, but the music is the same--- who is Jesus to me, and who am I in this year of 2007, how am I dying to self in a nation caught in an insane war, who belong to an American Catholic Church that's experiencing the greatest scandal of it's whole history, and in a society that pummels and pounds us to define our primary identity as childish consumers, manipulators and complainers. Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am," is about all of this. Let's turn to Paul of Tarsus.

Paul, without any doubt is one of the 8 or 10 most influential and astounding men in the 2000 year history of western civilization. He was certainly the most learned of all the apostles and is often named as the founder of Christianity. Before any of the gospels were written Paul's heart was on fire writing his epistles, founding communities, debating and proclaiming, and yes, theologizing about who was this Jesus of Nazareth. He was

also agitating and annoying the early church establishment. He loved his communities passionately. England's John Donne says, "Paul's words are universal thunder, thunder that passes through all the world and shakes it." Donne's words echo those of Paul, "The whole of creation is groaning, in one great act of giving birth." And those other earth shaking words, "He, Jesus the Christ, is the image of the unseen god, in him were created all things." And in him dwell all wisdom, all knowledge and all understanding.

It is my contention that Paul's spirit and drive, the dynamism, the energy, the boldness and fearless determination of his apostolic life points to jvc-type of action and commitment. In fact tonight we ought to declare St. Paul, along with Dorothy Day, as the patron saints of JV's and the JVC alumni. These two will keep our compass needle pointed toward the pole star, Jesus Christ, and to the gritty work of establishing the kingdom.

But let's go to our scripture passage.....

Paul has been turned inside out, he has been shocked and made blind by heavenly electricity that shattered his former identity. He had been a fervent Pharisee, a red-hot Taliban, out to terrorize and imprison these dissident Christians. Now Christ has become both the center and circumference of his new world view, his only boast, his total life. All that had defined him as Saul dropped away because of Jesus' cunning question. Saul fell into the trap---when the voice from heaven said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" He foolishly asked "Who are you?" The Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador, as well as Maura Clarke and Ita Ford fell into that same trap. So did Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Franz Jagerstatter, Caesar Chavez and sojourner truth, Henri Nouwen, and Sr. Dorothy Sang. They all bit, and squirmed with that fishhook in their mouth.

Paul tells us, "What were once my assets I now count as losses? In fact because of the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, I count everything else as rubbish, filth." Then we see the very heart of Paul on fire. "I want only to gain Christ, and be given a place in him, that I may come to know him, and the power of the resurrection. I long to partake of his suffering, by being molded to the pattern of his death, striving in all towards the goal of resurrection from the dead."

"Brother and sisters," Paul goes on, "I do not reckon myself as having taken hold of it yet; I can only say that forgetting all that lies behind me, and straining forward to what lies in front, I am racing towards the finish-line.

The text concludes with a typical Pauline subtlety: "This is the way in which all of us who are mature should be thinking, and if you are still thinking differently in any way, then God has yet to make this matter clear to you. Meanwhile let us together go forward boldly from the point we have attained."

I want to say as sharply as I can my own conviction. With St. Paul "I am certain of this: neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nothing already in existence, and nothing still to come, nor any power, not the heights nor the depths, nor any created thing whatever can separate us from the love of god, known to us in Christ Jesus our lord." Rom.8:38