

The Old Mule in the Well

A parable is told of a farmer who owned an old mule. The mule fell into the farmer's well. The farmer heard the mule 'braying' - or - whatever mules do when they fall into wells.

After carefully assessing the situation, the farmer sympathized with the mule, but decided that neither the mule nor the well was worth the trouble of saving. Instead, he called his neighbors together and told them what had happened...and enlisted them to help haul dirt to bury the old mule in the well and put him out of his misery.

Initially, the old mule was hysterical!

But as the farmer and his neighbors continued shoveling and the dirt hit his back, a thought struck him. It suddenly dawned on him that every time a shovel load of dirt landed on his back, he should shake it off and step up!

This he did, blow after blow.

"Shake it off and step up...shake it off and step up...shake it off and step up!"

He repeated to encourage himself. No matter how painful the blows of dirt, or distressing the situation seemed, the old mule fought "panic" and just kept right on shaking it off and stepping up!

It wasn't long before the old mule, battered and exhausted, stepped triumphantly over the wall of the well.

The dirt that seemed would bury him, actually blessed him. All because of the manner in which he handled his adversity.

Today's gospel is filled with signs of the end of the world: wars, and famines, and dreadful omens. Clearly the gospel writers are pointing to that great day when Jesus will return, bring this world to an end, and establish the Kingdom of God. But it would be a mistake for us to limit the meaning of today's gospel to that great event at the end of time. For the truth is that in our lives we experience moments when **our** world comes to an end. There are moments of passage, moments of change, when one world ends and another begins. These moments can be joyful or frightening. Oftentimes they are both.

When you commit yourself to another person in marriage or when you give birth to a new son or daughter, your world changes. There are new opportunities and there are new responsibilities. Very soon you cannot even remember the way things used to be. When you are told that you no longer have a job, when you file for divorce, when you receive a negative medical diagnosis, when the person you love dies; one world ends and a new one begins. As much as you would like, you cannot go back again. When your youngest child leaves for college, when you hold your grandchild for the first time in your arms, when you enter retirement; your world changes and you must change with it.

In all of these rites of passage, in all of these changes—even when they are joyful—there is always some fear. Will I be able to be the parent that my child needs me to be? How will it be living without my children under my roof? How will I face the holidays without the person I love? How will I fair with

chemotherapy? When we face a new reality, when we enter a new world, there is fear. How do we deal with it? How do we cope when our world changes?

Today's gospel points us in a direction. Jesus says, "***By your perseverance you will save your lives***", like our friend the donkey and his perseverance! Jesus is saying that when we enter a new world we must be willing to persevere. But what do we mean by perseverance? You can define perseverance in a lot of different ways, but the understanding I am suggesting to you today is one which is most common and most practical. This is the understanding that I hear over and over again at wedding receptions, in funeral homes and at baptism parties. It's the understanding of perseverance that most easily and commonly comes to our lips:

Perseverance is living one day at a time. Perseverance is refusing to be overwhelmed by all the things that we do not understand and cannot control in the new world in which we must live. Perseverance is choosing to take one step, the next step—choosing to take that step as best as we can and to keep taking the next step until we end up where we ought to be.

Now this understanding of perseverance can seem foolish to some people. They can ask, "How can you take one step and be sure that you're going anywhere?" "How do you know that that one step will lead you to where you need to be?" "How can you live one day at a time?" "Who is planning for the months and years ahead?"

Now these questions are not pointless. In fact they make a certain amount of sense, if we **presume** that we are living our lives alone. But Christians have a different perspective. **We believe** that God is living our lives with us, that God is in fact guiding us. We believe that when we take that one step, that next step, God is guiding us in the right direction. We believe that when we live one day at a time, the day that we live is connected to future days which God is planning for our benefit.

With faith we have the freedom to take the next step, to live this day, and to leave the rest to God. Now, this understanding of perseverance as living one day at a time is beautifully captured in a prayer by **Saint Cardinal John Henry Newman**, formally titled, “*the Pillar of the Cloud*”. This prayer would be appropriate to pray every time we leave one world behind and enter a new one. Newman’s prayer goes like this:

Lead kindly light, amid the encircling gloom.

Lead thou me on!

The night is dark, and I am far from home.

Lead thou me on!

Keep Thou my feet, I do not ask to see

The distant scene—one step enough for me.

Let us then persevere in taking that next step. Let us believe that God is with us and God will lead us on.

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Deacon Don