

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 1st SUNDAY OF LENT (A)
Genesis 2: 7-9; 3: 1-7 Psalm 51 Romans 5: 12-19 Matthew 4: 1-11
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

At a recent family baptism, I asked the parents and godparents the ritual’s prescribed question, “Do you reject the glamor of evil and refuse to be mastered by it?” They answered, “Yes”--- we had rehearsed their parts before the service. Was it just a ritual response, something they were supposed to say? We will be asked similar questions at the baptisms during the Easter Vigil service over a month from now. How can we so easily believe that evil won’t, through its many appealing disguises, master us? Evil is so subtle, it doesn’t post a sign when we meet it reading, “I am evil, avoid at all costs.” Indeed, sometimes evil appears as a very good thing.... “to do the wrong thing for the right reason.” Why else do we succumb to it? Jesus’ temptations looked like a good thing for him to accept, both for himself and for us.

These temptations may seem strange on first sight; they don’t involve the attraction to immoral acts most of us would call temptations. Rather, for Jesus, the temptations were designed to get him to take the easier way out in accomplishing the mission God gave him. The devil tries to get Jesus to do things his way, not God’s. Temptation didn’t occur just once and for all, early in his public life, out in a deserted area. The temptations would continue through Jesus’ ministry, always there for him to choose. Temptation doesn’t go away for us; neither did it for Jesus.

“If you are the Son of God....,” they begin. In the Hebrew scriptures, “son of God” could mean an angel, a divine being, Israel itself, or even a special ruler. It would mean, “godlike,” or someone in a special relationship to God— a relationship like that of a child and parent, bound together by love and obedience. Such a person would be completely dependent and trusting in God’s ability to provide basic nourishment and all that is needed for the full life of a person. So, for the devil to call Jesus, Son of God, was to underline and challenge his unique relationship with God and his extraordinary powers. The devil was tempting Jesus’ faith in the relationship. Should Jesus call on his special standing with God to perform a miracle to feed himself? After all, the devil seems to be suggesting, why should

anyone beloved by God have to suffer hunger, or any other pain? Shouldn't God protect from all harm and pain those closest to God—like Jesus?

What about the rest of us? Wouldn't pain be a sign that one wasn't beloved by God as one thought? If we believe in Jesus shouldn't this special relationship give us a privileged and pain-free life, sparing us the pain of the human condition? Like hunger; failure of our life's projects; sickness; doubts; restless nights of worry? Judging from Jesus' response, God is offering no quick fix for our problems, no massive supply of food; no end to questions and ambiguities in our lives. If Jesus had given into that first temptation, he would have spared himself the pain that often accompanies our lives. But he would also have distanced himself from us. He would not have lived a truly human life. And we would not be able to identify with him, claim him as one who truly knows our human struggle.

Recently Patty Hearst has been back in the news. Thirty years ago, she was abducted in California by the radical Simbianese Liberation Army. They told the wealthy Hearst family that if they wanted their daughter back the Hearsts were to bring truck loads of food to the inner city for the poor. People heard about the free food and the trucks were mobbed. In the melee that ensued, the truck drivers took to shoveling the food out the backs of the trucks into the claspings and hungry crowds. It was a dehumanizing act. Was that any way to feed and express care for the poor? Wouldn't it have been that way for Jesus if he turned stones into bread? Who would have listened to his message, the real bread he had to offer deeply hungry people? The Romans attracted crowds to their circuses by offering them bread. Had Jesus done the same to attract people to his mission, it would have turned into a circus! God has much to give us to feed our hungers. In our first world country, with all its plenty, it isn't the search for basics that distract people from receiving "every word that comes from the mouth of God." It's the shopping malls, catalogues, faster computers, tv shopping stations, men and women's magazines and more—all dedicated to keeping our mind on other things than God and God's ways.

Lent gives us an opportunity to push all these aside, at least for a while, to refocus on what is really life-giving bread that will really nourish us in our current deserts. It comes with its offer of change and repentance. A season that offers new light, a chance to start over, an opportunity for renewal, is not a down or drab time, but a joyous one. It doesn't mean it's a happy time--- for the changes we must tend to will cause initial discomfit. But joy lies just below the surface as we respond to

God's breathing life into us. During this time, we can tend more to God who wants to speak a word to us that can be re-orienting and life giving. Let's put aside as many distractions as possible the next 6 weeks and listen.

Let's look at the Genesis reading for a moment. My first impression is that our Lectionary chops up the original text and leaves out the creation of the woman, the "partner" for the man. (The Canadian Lectionary includes it.) This means that the woman first appears in this reading as the one who first gave into temptation and leads the man to his fall. Be careful then of an anti-woman tone in your preaching. It is clear in the Bible that both give into temptation. Notice that we can't even blame the serpent, a wily creature created by God. The serpent insinuates, tells half truths. The humans make the choice. Temptation begins with suspicion of God's motives, suspicions whether God is truly good, generous and interested in our welfare.

The pair can't resist the possibilities of what freedom will bring. The humans draw the conclusion that they are better off as aristocrats ("gods") than as creatures living in obedience to God. Humans continually grasp with a longing what can only be filled by God. The serpent poses the question: "Why not?" ---- "Who says you can't?" --- "Of course you can!" Note the question asked can't be answered with a simple yes or no. Wisdom is required to know what God is asking of us, what the consequences of not obeying will be. The temptation isn't over an obvious evil against a good. It is about what is "pleasing to the eye", "good for food"---- whatever would seem to give the couple wisdom. We make choices that we think are smart, make us happier, better off. And we are deceived and suffer an eye-opening experience that brings us a shame we never reckoned on.

Punishment follows, we are driven out, we suffer the consequences of our foolish choices. Our Lenten journey reminds us that Christ will lead us back through another tree of knowledge of good and evil. His obedience overcomes our disobedience; from the cross he gives up his spirit and breathes back into us the life giving Spirit of God, a spirit of an obedient child.

The preacher might want to develop on the theme of the kind of "knowledge" we have gained by going our own way... following our own wisdom... wanting to know it all:

For example, we gain knowledge, how to --- make wars and advanced

weapons of war; cheat on another; lie for our own gain; elect leaders that represent our narrow part of society against the "others"; exclude the poor from our vision and concern; busy ourselves so that we don't have to reflect on our nakedness; etc.. The front page of the newspaper will provide with more than enough examples of how we have gained "knowledge" and how we use it against one another and ourselves.

QUOTABLE:

The desert is exquisitely beautiful, although hot, dry, desolate, harsh, unforgiving. The desert is a place where people always live in a survival mode, looking for water and food, a place where one is utterly alone and very vulnerable. One's fears emerge fear of heights, of darkness, of illness, of being lost, of not being in control. The desert, the wilderness, is a place each of us has experienced sometime, perhaps many times, in our life. The wilderness is the perfect place to prepare for a new coming of God into our world, not because God lives in the wilderness but because the wilderness strips one of self-sustaining supports, leaving one open to God's initiative.

— M. Race & L. Brink, *IN THIS PLACE: REFLECTIONS ON THE LAND OF THE GOSPELS FOR THE LITURGICAL CYCLES*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998, page 37.

READERS' RESPONSE:

"As I reflected on your comments about Ground Zero a thought came to my mind. As Jesus shed His Blood to make us holy, so too as His disciples when our blood is shed, the place with which it mingles becomes "Holy Ground". I am in Him and He is in me, thus, He too is there.

There is no sacrifice without the shedding of blood. I would think that Ground Zero has becoming a Holy Place and God's children know it, thus the reverence? We recognize the sacrifice."

-----Paul Mc Inernery

JUSTICE NOTES:

(During Lent we will be posting six segments on the "Basic Themes of Catholic Social Teaching." These may be helpful for your preaching, or you may want to put them in your parish newsletter each week.)

NUMBER 1: THE OPTION FOR THE POOR AND VULNERABLE

Poor and vulnerable people have a special place in Catholic social teaching. A basic moral test of a society is how its most vulnerable members are faring. This is not a new insight; it is the lesson of the parable of the Last Judgment (Mt.25) our tradition calls us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first. As Christians, we are called to respond to the needs of all our sisters and brothers, but those with the greater needs require the greatest response.

—U.S. Catholic Bishops, “A Century of Social Teachings.”

Principles:

When there is a question of protecting the rights of individuals, the poor and helpless have a claim to special consideration. The rich population has many ways of protecting themselves, and stands less in need of help...

—RERUM NOVARUM (29)

Love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and above all, those without hope for a better future.

—SOLLICITUDO REI SOCIALIS (42)

Some Practical Ways to Approach a Holy Fast

Look at fasting, and all the ways in which you re-examine that discipline, not as punishment but as a service to your body---to its good. The body is good and worthy because of the mystery of the incarnation: God's flesh-taking among us has made all flesh, all earthly things holy.

Look at fasting not as denial of the flesh or a degradation of fleshly hungers, but as leading to the enhancement of our earthly joys. The Talmud says: "One will have to give account on the Judgement Day of every good thing which one might have enjoyed--and did not."

See fasting as necessary to the enhancement of the feast. A good appetite allows us to enjoy the earthly gifts we were given. We need to learn to be deeply joyful as much as we need to learn healthy, constructive suffering.

Fast from instant gratifications. Take a moment to reexamine cravings and hungers, yearnings, compulsions, and impulses as natural and right--but in need of being fed at the right level.

Examine your diet and resolve to make the necessary changes if it is not healthy. Examine your eating habits and change them if you eat impulsively, constantly, alone, too fast, unconsciously or without savoring your food, with disinterest, without care or dignity.

Eat only when seated at a table. Try not to eat alone but find someone to share your meal with. Companion means the one you share your bread with. Invite the lonely. Bring a meal to a shut-in. Volunteer in a soup kitchen.

Return a sense of the sacramental to mealtime in your household. Present all meals with dignity. Take at least forty-five minutes to eat your dinner. (The average American family eats a whole meal in Five minutes!)

If you have a family, discuss these Lenten exercises with them. Make your Lenten practices an exercise in mutual support and solidarity.

Learn to cook and serve the foods the poor eat. Tasty and healthful meals can be made from lentils, rice, grains, and legumes which, eaten together, offer all the protein you need. You may want to invest in a simple Indian or Mexican cookbook.

Try vegetarian meals. If we eat the grains instead of feeding them to the cattle, we can save the beasts caught in the middle--and also save the forests that are cut down to make grasslands for cattle!

Make a Lenten collection box to set on the table. Label it: "The Fasts of the Rich are the Feasts of the Poor". The money you save by eating sparingly, not dining out, foregoing meats, can be graphically transferred into alms.

Begin planning or planting a vegetable garden or herb patch. Growing tending, harvesting, sharing and eating your own produce brings us down to earth and is often a healing experience.

If you have no difficulties with your meals or mealtime and food is not a neurotic issue with you, consider other ways of "fasting." During Lent we ask ourselves: What does my baptism cost me?" Surely it asks us to "fast from our sinful behaviors."

Fast from guzzling gas. Drive the speed limit. Ride public transportation. Ride a bike or walk when you can.

Fast from compulsive consumerism. Check your closets, cupboards, storage rooms and garage. How many items have you collected that you thought you needed---until you got them home and had "buyer's remorse?"

In reparation, choose some of these areas in your house to clean out. Fix, clean and deliver these items to those who need them more than you do.

Examine the ways in which you consume and waste, using up nature's resources and adding to landfills or air/water pollution. Shorten your showers. Save the warm-up water for your garden. Eat your leftovers at the next meal. Recycle religiously. Refuse to use plastic. Use your own shopping sack. Write on both sides of your paper or recycle your paper as scratch pads. Lower your

thermoset or air-conditioner. Wear a sweater, add a blanket--or take them off.

Find ways to volunteer in your neighborhood or parish. Every neighborhood has its poor and lonely. Visit the sick. Cook for the old or the homeless. Work for children's rights and education. Build dwellings for the homeless. Write letters to politicians for peace and justice, and for the conservation of the earth's resources.

Leo, Bishop of Rome, once wrote:

The sum total of our fasting does not consist in merely abstaining from food. In vain do we deny our body food if we do not withhold our heart from wickedness and restrain our lips so that they speak no evil. We must so moderate our rightful use of food that our other desires may be subject to the same rule. They therefore who desire to do good works, let them not fear that they shall be without the means: since even for given two pennies, the generosity of the poor widow of the Gospel was glorified!

-from ASSEMBLY, (Notre Dame Center for Pastoral Liturgy) January, 1993

Some additional sources for your Lenten preaching and reflection:

Gabe Huck's, THE THREE DAYS: PARISH PRAYER IN THE PASCHAL TRIDUUM. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publication, 1981.

"Easter's Fifty Days", LITURGY: JOURNAL OF THE LITURGICAL CONFERENCE, (vol. 3, no.1) (Washington: The Liturgical Conference).

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A.”** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to:

<http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year A–CD” button on the right and follow the instructions.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will

be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

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<http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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