

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT (A)

1 Samuel 16: 1b, 6-7, 10-13a Psalm 23 Ephesians 5: 8-14 John 9: 1-41

By: Jude

Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

A commentary Patricia Datchuck Sanchez wrote in 1999 (“Celebration: An Ecumenical Resource”) on today’s readings brings a childhood memory to mind. Sanchez tells the story of Helen Keller, a story that inspired me when I first heard it from a grammar school nun. Keller, one of the most outstanding Americans in the twentieth century, was still an infant when she contracted a serious illness that left her blind and deaf. Initially her family pitied her and let her do pretty much what she wanted. Her darkness was more than physical because she was cut off from relationships with those closest to her. The family hired Annie Sullivan to teach her. When Helen was 7, thanks to Annie, she had the break through that shaped the rest of her life. Both a play and movie dramatized this moment very powerfully. Annie took Helen to the pump and as the water flowed into Helen’s hands, Annie signed the word “water” over and over again. The child suddenly made the association between the word and the reality. That moment opened the world to Helen, freed her, not only from the sightless-soundless world she had inhabited, but also opened her to those around her. Helen lived a long a rich life and in my high school years I remember our English teacher assigning us some of her essays----then I wasn’t just inspired by what I heard about Helen, but by Helen herself. She helped us become aware of the gifts we take for granted and appreciate what life offers us every day. Helen’s breakthrough at the water was just the first in a series of breakthroughs for her—and through her, for us.

The blind man’s story in today’s gospel is similar to Helen’s —and to ours. It starts with a breakthrough; he is cured of his blindness. But that was just the beginning, he has a long journey ahead of him. As the story starts, the blind beggar attracts the attention of Jesus’ disciples. “Whose sin was it, his or his parents that caused him to be born blind?” By the religious standards of the day, a person’s afflictions were seen as a punishment for his or her sins, or the sins of the parents. You can hear that perspective in the disciples’ question. They want the theological answer, and we do too: what causes afflictions, are they because of something we or our ancestors did? Is God punishing us for them? Are we the way we are because of genetics? Or our earliest upbringing? Our education, or

lack of it? Good questions and important ones.

Those are important questions, but at this moment, Jesus sees a person on the edges of society. Because of the man's affliction, he was considered by some, a sinner being justly punished for his misdeeds. The man is in need; while for those around him, he is an object of discussion and speculation. Jesus has another perspective; he sees a person in darkness and responds to his need. Through the gospel story, Jesus also wants to illumine our own darkness, for we too live with our sin, limitations and false notions of God. We must also deal with questions about suffering and its relationship to sin and guilt. Jesus begins with the man's immediate need: he directs the man to the waters where physical sight and spiritual insight will begin for him. As the story progresses, the man will go from being an outcast to someone with self-confidence, independence and spiritual maturity—not all at once, but step by step. At the end, he will recognize Jesus as the source of his new life and its goal. His journey parallels our own faith life which begins at the baptismal font. Those waters start our journey of faith but also stay with us throughout our lives and eventually lead us back to Christ—our beginning and our end.

We find ourselves in the middle of another Lent. Baptism gave us initial sight, just as the Siloam waters opened the man's eyes. At this stage of Lent and at today's liturgical celebration, we have another opportunity to check our vision. We look back and reflect on what choices we have made in our lives. When and where did we prefer shadows, illusions and darkness? How have we been blinded by the glare of other lights, by their dazzle and allure? What caused us to go off track, like a person blinded by headlights while driving? We were influenced by the shortcuts, compromises and the easiest way out. We noticed and judged others based on their looks, power, and influence, while overlooking those labeled as insignificant and dispensable.

I was recently preaching in Miami, not a bad place to be while blizzards are howling elsewhere in the country! I walked alone through a park in the evening and watched a gorgeous sunset. Darkness comes so slowly one barely notices it, especially when distracted by the colors the setting sun gives off. The dying light is hypnotizing. But before you know it, the sun is gone, and it is dark. Without the light, you could get lost easily in an unfamiliar place. Watch out for that low chain fence. Where was that water fountain? Wasn't there a pool here? A curb? Where

did I leave the car? It's a lot like life isn't it? The light goes out gradually and imperceptibly as we are distracted by the attractions, the "glow." We focus on our own needs; want to have it all now; stay independent and avoid ties that "limit" us; attend to our schedule and plans. It is attractive to serve our wants first; like watching a setting sun.

Eventually though, we have less and less light to see by and guide our steps and we find ourselves tripping up daily. Once solid relationships show cracks and familiar patterns of life, like family, faith and community, no longer are the priorities they used to be. Nor are they there to support us when we need them the most. The light fades. Jesus saw the danger of that happening to his disciples in their struggle against the world's darkness: "The night comes," he warns them, "when no one can work." But he also reassures them and us, "I am the light of the world."

In some ways our blindness comes as a result of the influence of others on us: we enter a world where sin seems to be waiting for us, we breathe it in and take it on ourselves. Darkness enters early in our lives. For some, it is almost irresistible, like the inmate in maximum security who told me that his father was in Soledad and his older brother in Folsom, two of California's most notorious prisons. I wondered what growing up in his environment did to him. Would I have been able to resist that kind of darkness myself? He had strong negative forces tugging on him early in his life. While we might not have such powerful forces on us, nevertheless we too, from early age, get tugged on by influences that would take us away from our primary calling to be Christians.

We have a long gospel story today. Like others, we listen to it attentively and reflect on its details. If we do, what may jump out at us is that this story is our story; our individual story and our community story as well. Like the blind man we were found by God. We may not have needed physical sight. What we needed was vision—something to get us moving in the right direction. We needed to see who we are before God, where we are going and what we must do along the way. But before all that action could happen, we were given the gift of sight: we saw Jesus and that vision has given us direction. That seeing-gift is what brings us to liturgy today, aware that we are always in need of having our eyes cleared of the dust and blur our travels cause. And it is Lent. Lent gives us a time to admit: we have stumbled in the dark and we need to return to the light we received at

baptism's pool; Jesus is that light and has a wisdom that will keep us from tripping again.

I was talking with a preacher the other day about an obvious and very basic concern concerning today's gospel: whether the preacher should choose to read the long form of the story or the optional short one. I would go with the long version. The other gospels tell short stories, but John deliberately makes much of the "signs" Jesus performs and out of respect for this wonderful story teller and the power of the tale, I would let the congregation experience its impact. If you think it is appropriate, invite them to sit down and picture the details as the story unfolds. And then, read the story slowly enough for them to do that!

QUOTABLE

Lay sermons permitted, Vatican tells Swiss bishops.

Proposals by Swiss bishops to allow lay theologians to give sermons and Protestants to receive Communion have met with the approval of the Curia in Rome, Bishop Amédée Grab, president of the Swiss bishops' conference, said this week.

The Swiss church is having to cope with a shortage of priests and in an effort to deal with the crisis its bishops' conference has come up with controversial plans to make greater use of the laity serving as pastoral assistants. The Swiss bishops' conference has now declared that the assistants (who hold university degrees in theology) are to be allowed to preach during Mass and baptize whenever a priest was not available. The bishops, who announced to journalists following their return from their ad limina visit to Rome that they have secured Curial backing for their plans, have also secured the necessary permission for the Protestant partner in a mixed marriage to receive the Eucharist in a Catholic Church. The general secretary of the Swiss bishops' conference, Agnell Rickenmann, said that the two declarations were partly a response to the shortage of priests in Switzerland, but also reflected the Swiss Church's "independence". He said: "In Switzerland we have a 30-year tradition of theologically trained lay people active in the Church."

Accusations that the declarations were against canon law and contradicted last year's Vatican edict that only priests could give sermons, were quick to follow. *Pro Ecclesia*, a conservative Catholic group, said it looked very much as if, shortly

before setting out for Rome, the Swiss bishops were determined to "present the Vatican with a *fait accompli*". It was also reported that Austrian and German bishops had berated the Swiss bishops at the annual liturgical conference (for bishops in German-speaking countries, including South Tyrol and Luxembourg) in Augsburg at the end of January for "pressing ahead of the world Church" on such matters.

But the Swiss bishops were not hauled over the coals during their five-day *ad limina* visit to Rome. On the contrary, Bishop Grab said on his return, this had been his fourth *ad limina* visit and he had "never returned so happy". The head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, had told the Swiss bishops that in emergency cases lay theologians could hold a "brief sermon-like discourse" or a meditation based on the Mass for the day but that this should not be allowed to become the "general norm".

Christa Pongratz-Lippitt, Vienna <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/cgi-bin/citw.cgi/past-00217#EUROPE>

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"Can you imagine what it's like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it's like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, 'I love you. I'll see you next week,' when you never know if they're going to call and say, 'He's up next—it's time for his execution.'"

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

James Morgan #0291861 (On death row since 7/8/99)
David Gainey #0139378 (7/13/99)
Billy Anderson #0007328 (10/26/99)
----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 2760

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,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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