

“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:

The second reading from Ephesians sets the tone and names the tension in both today's readings and our world: the conflict is between light and darkness--- good and evil. “You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light...” It doesn't take too much life experience to know that the struggle is far from over—contrary to the euphoric opening tone of Ephesians. But then, right after these opening words, Christians are advised not to take part in the “fruitless works of darkness.” So, the seeming triumphalism is tempered with a note of reality—the struggle is far from over. Christians, “children of light,” still must be strong and vigilant to do what is “pleasing to the Lord.”

Lest the worshiper get the impression that Ephesians is merely a voice of encouragement, cheering us on from the sidelines, today's gospel gives us a vivid and dramatic miracle story. It is not only about the cure of the blind man, but the deeper light-giving that happens as the man faces opponents and naysayers to his experience. Let's turn to this story, but before we do, I will repeat a suggestion I have made before when the gospel selections are so long—as they will also be in subsequent Sundays. I would not choose to proclaim the shorter version that is given as an option. Why violate the story teller's intention? Why chop up a well-told story? If John thought a shorter story would have accomplished his intention, he would have given one. If the reading seems too long for people to pay attention to while standing, then invite them to be seated.

One significant ray of light we receive from Jesus in the blind man's story comes from the opening lines. It was the common belief at that time that sickness and misfortune were caused by one's sin. People wanted to give God credit for everything that happens to humans. But they went too far, attributing to God both the good and the bad of their lives. The belief also attributed birth defects to either parental sin or the baby's sin while still in the womb! When the disciples point out the man “blind from birth” they voice the contemporary opinion, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

We might chuckle at their naivety, but we still hear sickness or misfortune being attributed to God and to our wrong doing. “God must be punishing me.” “I must have done something terrible for God to be punishing me in this way?” When we already feel the disorientation, confusion and the disrupted life that suffering causes, how sad to be additionally burdened thinking that God is the source of our pain. And that it is a punishment for something we have done! What isolation such a thinking can cause; believing that not even God is with us and that those closest to us might hold the same belief and think less of us. “She must have done something wrong otherwise why is God doing this to her?” “If he really had faith, God would help him.”

Are we so far removed from the thinking that blames a person for the misfortune they bear? In our “enlightened” world don’t people still think that poverty, and its resulting maladies like sickness and short life span, are the fault of the poor? (And aren’t those physically or sexually abused sometimes blamed for what they “provoked” in others? “She wouldn’t have gotten raped if she hadn’t dressed that way.”) As long as people think in this way, they won’t look deeper into the economic, cultural or political reasons that keep poor people and whole nations in a permanent underclass. Such attitudes about poverty’s sources will also prevent people from doing something to change oppressive conditions for groups of people in our own cities and for nations in other parts of the world. Jesus casts light on such darkness and answers their question, “Neither he nor his parents sinned.” The blame lies elsewhere; maybe even on the very people who are blaming others for their dire conditions! God is not punishing the man for sin; indeed, God wants to do something that will deliver the man from his blindness. After enlightening his disciples, Jesus sets about changing the man’s condition. So, he cures two forms of blindness. He enables both the man to see and his disciples to get a different perspective.

Did you notice that when Jesus responds to the disciples’ question he shifts from the “I” to the “we”? No accident, for he suggests we too must be involved in activities that bring light to the world. The Christian’s unenlightened ways of thinking are exposed by the light the “Rabbi” (the teacher) has cast, and we are expected to bring this light to similar situations. We are to stop finding excuses for our lack of involvement in the needs of the world; we must stop blaming the victims and set about making visible “the works of God” by ending the situations

that cause and continue misery in people's lives. Jesus' cure also extends to those of us who carry judgmental thoughts about the race, gender, economic condition or sexual orientation of others. We invite his healing today, asking to see our neighbor in a true light. With Christ's help we will attest to the same healing the blind man experienced--- "he opened my eyes."

Jesus invites the blind man to wash in the Pool of Siloam. Why would John make the aside that Siloam means Sent? He is reminding us in subtle ways that not just Jesus, but all those whose eyes have been opened at the pool of baptism, are sent to be bearers of light. But it is necessary to emphasize that we are not sent on our own. Look at how the story unfolds. The man's eyes are opened at the pool. At first he only has a beginner's notion of who Jesus is, "he is a prophet." Yet this is enough to get him in trouble with the religious authorities. He is expelled from their presence. This suggests he is "excommunicated" from their religion. Since the religious leaders hold so much authority in the community, this expulsion would put him even further apart than his blindness did. He is really left alone. Jesus searches him out and confirms the new thing that has happened to him and then evokes an act of faith from him. At first the man called Jesus a prophet; by the time this part of his journey is completed he has made an act of faith in Jesus, "I do believe, Lord." And John adds that he "worshiped" Jesus. He has gone from being blind, to having physical sight, and then to an even deeper sight, for he sees who Jesus is.

The story also reflects John's community's experience. As Jews, they first thought their following Jesus could happen within Judaism. One way those new Christians continued to practice their Jewish faith was to be "discrete"; they kept a low profile when among others. Perhaps their faith resembled the first stage of faith expressed by the blind man, they believed Jesus was a prophet. But that is an inadequate expression, and more is required. (Jesus is not just one very good person among many who have lived. That's not what we believe.) Eventually, their confession of faith in Christ got them in trouble with their Jewish families and friends. Like the blind man, they too were expelled. Imagine how difficult following Jesus had become for them. It all started simply enough, but they could not imagine how far from their origins and former lives their new sight would take them.

Just as the man's initial sight was not the end of his coming to the light, so it is with us. Our darkness is replaced in baptism by the vision of Jesus as Lord; with

the blind man, we too worship him. But whether we were baptized as infants or later in our lives, the washing in the pool was just the first step. We can agree and exclaim with Ephesians that we were “once in darkness but now are light in the Lord.” The task, as Ephesians suggests, is to live as “children of light.” Easier said than done. Left on our own, we know this is not possible, but we were not left on our own after we left the baptismal pool. Jesus has come out to find us and accompany us on our way. We look to his light to be children of the light. We know we need that light because, like the blind man, we are daily challenged by an unbelieving world. At the Easter Vigil we will be invited to turn to the baptismal pool and sign ourselves with the water. This is not a rebaptism. It is a renewed commitment to the One who is the Light and who guides us in a world that requires us to daily distinguish light from darkness.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

A CRUCIFIED CHRIST IN HOLY WEEK: ESSAYS ON THE FOUR GOSPEL PASSION NARRATIVES, by Raymond E. Brown. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1989. Paper, 72 pages.

An eminent biblical scholar reflects on the four Passion narratives. His strong pastoral interests come through these very readable essays. Good for preachers. Also good for those who want to do some meditative reading during Holy Week.

QUOTABLE

“The only reason for Jesus to mix clay with the spittle and smear it on the eyes of the blind man was to remind you that he who restored the man to health by anointing his eyes with clay is the very one who fashioned the first man out of clay, and that this clay that is our flesh can receive the eternal life through the sacrament of baptism.

You, too, should come to Siloam, that is, to him who was sent by the Father.

Come and be baptized, it is time; come quickly, and you too will be able to say, ‘I was blind, and now I see.’”

—Ambrose of Milan, (fourth century), quoted in A LENT SOURCEBOOK: THE FORTY DAYS , BOOK TWO (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications), page 66.

JUSTICE NOTES

(During Lent we are 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 FOUR: THE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE HUMAN PERSON

Theme:

Flowing from our God-given dignity, each person has basic rights and responsibilities. These include the rights to freedom of conscience and religious liberty, to raise a family, to immigrate, to live free from unfair discrimination, and to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family. People have a fundamental right to life and to those things that make life truly human: food, clothing, housing, health care, education, security, social services and employment. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities—to one another, to our families and to the larger society, to respect the rights of others and to work for the common good.

----U.S. Catholic Bishops, "A century of Social Teaching"

Principles:

"Every person has the right to life, to bodily integrity and to the means which are necessary and suitable for the proper development of life. These means are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care and finally the necessary social services. Therefore, a human being also has the right to security in cases of sickness, inability to work, widowhood, old age, unemployment, or in any other case in which the person is deprived of the means of subsistence through no personal fault."

—PACEM IN TERRIS (11)

"Let recognition be given to the fact that international order is rooted in the inalienable rights and dignity of the human being. Let the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights be ratified by all governments who have not yet adhered to it and let it be fully observed by all."

—JUSTITIA IN MUNDO (64)

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

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation:

<http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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