

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 10<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

Hosea 6: 3-6 Psalm 50 Romans 4: 18-25 Matthew 9: 9-13

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

We are back in Ordinary time. From now until the 24<sup>th</sup>. Sunday, our second readings will be taken from Paul’s letter to the Romans. During this time shouldn’t we attempt at least one or two, if not more, preachings from this great Pauline work? Preaching from Paul can be intimidating for some and so I will focus on Romans for this edition. If you decide not to preach on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. reading this week, I hope the following material will prove useful for another preaching during these next Sundays. Romans is going to be with us for a while!

We have a lot in common with the people who received Paul’s letters. His recipients were in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural communities. They were immigrants and citizens, lower and upper classes, men and women, free people and slaves. They were a minority in a society whose standards were different from their own beliefs. They needed guidance to survive so as not to be swallowed up by the surrounding world’s values. There were tensions caused from external factors; but there were internal problems as well. Paul writes to the early communities to address both moral and doctrinal issues that were dividing them. The letters are particular to the communities he addressed. Thus, we will not find all of Paul’s theology in one letter, just what was needed as a response to a local need or question he had been asked.

But while the letters were addressed to specific communities and the issues they were dealing with, they were saved and handed on because Paul treated major themes: dying and rising with Christ, becoming a new creation, enfleshing the gospel in particular situations, life in the Spirit, etc. Despite the fact that he wrote to specific churches, there was something universal in Paul’s letters that touches into our common Christian heritage.

Since we are beginning a long series of Sundays which have Romans as a second reading, this would be a good time to read Romans in its entirety—even in one sitting. Each of the subsequent weeks the readings will be snippets from the larger work and, as we focus our preaching on one particular Sunday’s section, it is still important to keep the entire work in mind. While we don’t want to give a class on Romans from the pulpit, the preacher must have familiarity with the entire

letter. You can see already that preaching from Paul is going to take more work, but over the next weeks we have the luxury of time and the effort will be worth it. Here's a suggestion for spiritual reading this summer: Read through Romans with a good commentary on the letter. And one Sunday, when something from the epistle strikes us--- why not preach from it?

Before we get to today's reading, here is a little background. There were tensions within the Roman church between Jewish and Gentile Christians and Paul addresses the problems. Jewish converts were offended by the Gentile dismissal of the need to observe the dietary rules Jews had observed under the law. The Gentiles claimed the observances were incompatible with the gospel. The Jewish Christians would have wanted to continue obedience to the Torah as a guide for living a righteous life: Gentile Christians wanted to stress the gospel of justification by grace alone. In addition, Jewish Christians considered many ways of the Gentile Christians immoral, lacking in observance of norms and rules of behavior. They wanted the Gentiles to first become Jewish converts, accept and live under the law, as Jewish Christians did.

Paul addressed the objections to his teachings about freedom from the law. The letter isn't as intense as his letters to the Corinthians and Galatians were. Instead, he writes to strengthen the Romans in their faith and to help heal the divisions among them. He reminds the Romans that both Jews and Gentiles were in need of salvation, "...all have sinned" (3:24). Paul defends the Gentiles who, like Abraham, had faith in God. The object of Christian faith, he says, is what "one man" Jesus did—for both Jews and Gentiles. Through baptism, Paul argues, we are united to Christ and so we die to sin. As a result, we belong, not to the law, but to a new obedience to God, through Christ's Spirit.

Paul reminds the Romans that as humans, they were all vulnerable to "the flesh." He doesn't mean that the physical is sinful, rather, "flesh" for him is that vulnerable part of human nature that is subject to the power of sin. When we humans give in to temptation and the ways of the world around us, we are living, Paul says, "according to the flesh." Paul once followed and lived according to the law, but when he accepted Christ, his whole view of salvation through the law changed. He writes to a community he hopes will be united in this new life through Christ. He sees in the new community great diversity: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, an eschatological sign of what will someday be in fulness --- God's community composed of all earth's peoples.

This background sketch is too short and, once again, I would encourage some further reading in Romans to open us up to its preaching possibilities; not just for this summer, but for whenever we meet Romans in public or private prayer settings. Now, to the passage at hand, today's second reading.

The reading comes from a larger section (4: 13-25) in which Paul is trying to show how God has done something new---people are acquitted of their sin because of their faith in Christ. He uses Abraham to illustrate his point. Abraham was considered "righteous" by the Jews, i.e. in his obedience to God he kept the law, even before it was given to Moses. When his faith was tested, he stayed faithful to God, even to the point of being willing to sacrifice his and Sarah's only son, Isaac. In using Abraham as an example to the Romans, Paul is showing a path to God apart from the Mosaic law.

Paul calls Abraham the "father of many nations," suggesting that the Gentiles are "the many nations," who have Abraham as their parent in faith. Paul implies that without circumcision or observance of the Mosaic law, Abraham was "righteous." So, those who follow the gospel of Jesus Christ, even though they do not follow the former Mosaic law, are made right with God through faith: the kind of faith Abraham had and which set him right before God. If the Romans believe in God's promise, as it was manifested in Christ, they will be "justified."

Paul spells out one aspect of Abraham's faith that led to his justification. Abraham trusted that God would act with the same power God used in creation; God would bring life where there was no life. Abraham, Paul says, "considered his own body as already dead...and the dead womb of Sarah." Nevertheless, Abraham believed that God could bring life from where only death was observable. The Creator would have to repeat the very act of creation and Abraham believed, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that God could do this. "Abraham believed, hoping against hope." Paul says this is what we believe God can do, bring life from death, for we, "believe in the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead...."

What was Abraham's faith like? It was, "hoping against hope." From a human perspective, nothing could be done, Abraham's body was "already dead" and Sarah had a "dead womb." The situation was beyond human capabilities to solve. But Abraham's hope wasn't based on human capacity—but on God's. Like Abraham, we believe that God has the power to bring life out of death. So, Paul suggests we Christians do what our Jewish ancestors have always done, believe in

the life-giving Creator God: who brought life to Abraham and Sarah where there was only death; who raised Jesus from the death of the tomb and who will also raise us to life.

In the meanwhile, how does the faith and hope Paul is calling us to affect this worship, this day and our lives? Our faith in our Creator God, the risen Christ and the gift of the life-giving Spirit is what emboldens us to do what would seem impossible otherwise. For example, have we not witnessed the faith and courage of those who despite being terminally ill, continue to bless us by their words and actions?

A few weeks ago there was an obituary of Thomas J Concannon in the New York Times. As a young tourist, he had been transfixed one night on the Afghan desert by the sight of a camel driver and his camels outlined on the horizon against the star-studded sky. The simplicity and beauty of what he saw changed his perspective on life. He decided to dedicate himself to indigent law and for years he defended the poor in the courts of New York City. He continued to show up at court on behalf of his clients, despite his terminal cancer, almost till the day he died. When asked why he didn't quit he said, "I'll surely die one day, but I'm not going to do it each day before." Now who else but the Creator could do that, inspire someone facing death to keep looking out for the needs of others? Life out of death.

It is early June in our part of the world, all nature is bursting with life. It hardly seems possible after the tough winter we had; what was frozen and lifeless is now blooming with life. The power of the Creator is evident, it is all around us. But Paul isn't directing us just to the reversals in nature. Instead, he invites us to look with the eyes of faith on Jesus Christ and to believe where the world deals death through war, poverty, violence and words, we are enabled and called to confront those signs of death by faithful and persevering witness to what we believe. Our God, we are reminded, is not the God of the dead, but of the living.

Dead people are: silent when they should speak; self-absorbed when another is in need; on-lookers when they should step forward; hoarding when they have more than enough; wasting while others go without; self-preserving when service, generosity and self-sacrifice are required. How can such people ever come out of these graves, overcome death and live lives that indicate death has no power over them? As Paul will say later in this letter, "Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Or, as he says now, our faith in "the one who raised Jesus our Lord

from the dead,” will be “credited to us.”

### BOOKS FOR THE PREACHER

There are lots of good books on preaching Paul and Pauline theology. When I started to write the above I reached over to my bookshelf and these are what I found helpful.

1. Daniel Patte, PREACHING PAUL. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984)
2. “St. Paul, Pastor and Theologian,” CHICAGO STUDIES, November, 1985.
3. Thomas Long, PREACHING AND THE LITERARY FORMS OF THE BIBLE, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989)
4. Calvin J. Roetzel, THE LETTERS OF PAUL: CONVERSATIONS IN CONTEXT, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991)
5. Leander Keck, PAUL AND HIS LETTERS, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979)
6. Stanley B. Marrow, PAUL: HIS LETTERS AND HIS THEOLOGY. (New York: Paulist Press, 1986)
7. Raymond Collins, PREACHING THE EPISTLES. (New York: Paulist Press, 1996)

### QUOTABLE

I love Abraham, that old weather-beaten  
unwavering nomad; when God called to him  
no tender hand wedged time into his stay.  
His faith erupted him into a way  
far-off and strange. How many miles are there  
from Ur to Haran? Where does Canaan lie  
or slow mysterious Egypt sit and wait?  
How could he think his aged thigh would bear  
nations or how consent that Isaac die,  
without an answer, much less an ado?  
I think, alas, how I manipulate dates and decisions, pull apart the dark,  
dally with doubts here and with counsel there,  
take out old maps and stare.  
Was there a call at all, my fears remark.  
I cry out: Abraham, old nomad you.  
Are you my father? Come to me in pity.  
Mine is a far and lonely journey, too.

-----Jessica Powers

## JUSTICE NOTES HUNGER IN THE WORLD

More than 800 million people in the world go hungry.

In developing countries, 6 million children die each year, mostly from hunger-related causes.

In the United States, 13 million children live in households where people have to skip meals or eat less to make ends meet. That means one in ten households in the U.S. are living with hunger or are at risk of hunger.

The financial costs to end hunger are relatively slight. The United Nations Development Program estimates that the basic health and nutrition needs of the world's poorest people could be met for an additional \$13 billion a year. Animal lovers in the United States and Europe spend more than that on pet food each year.

-----Source: Bread for the World Institute, quoted in PREACH,  
September/October 2004, page 37.

## 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:.....

Jimmy Mc Neill #0507467 (On death row since 7/15/03 )

Jeffrey Neal Duke #0113234 (9/26/03)

Linwood Earl Forte #0133102 (10/8/03)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

