

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 11th SUNDAY (A)

Exodus 19:2-6a Psalm 100 Romans 5: 6-11 Matthew 9: 36- 10:8

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

When I was sixteen I didn't know I was getting near sighted. A teacher noticed me squinting at the black board and suggested I have my eyes tested. What a revelation it was when the optometrist fitted me for eye glasses! I could now read signs from a distance that previously had been a blur. Thanks Mr. Goodman for noticing and suggesting I get my eyes checked; thanks to you, I could see what I was missing.

Let's not skip over the opening verse of today's gospel too quickly, "At the sight of the crowds, Jesus' heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd." Nothing wrong with Jesus' sight—he sees quite clearly. But it wasn't just the crowds' tattered clothes, diseases and physical poverty that Jesus saw; though he was often deeply moved by people's physical needs. He also saw the outsiders, beggars out at the hedgerows, prostitutes and public sinners. Invite them in, he would tell his disciples, for these are God's children and I have come to search them out and invite them to table. Jesus had a vision others did not and if his disciples were to be his true followers, they would have to have their eyes opened by him.

But when Jesus catches "sight of the crowds" today, he has still sharper vision. We are told that his heart was moved to pity for them. The Greek word used here for pity or compassion is interesting---"splachnizein." It comes from the noun for entrails or bowels. We would say Jesus "felt for the crowds in his gut." It is a quick and spontaneous feeling that reveals how instinctual and deep his feelings for the needy were. So, he wasn't just seeing with his eyes but he was feeling with his whole being. Jesus describes the crowds as being "like sheep without a shepherd." It is a poetic description of vulnerable, confused and lost creatures. But it is more than poetry, for the image of sheep stirs up Jewish memory. In the Hebrew scriptures, when the people were leaderless or with corrupt leaders (e.g. Ez. 34: 5-6) God promised to rescue them and be their shepherd. God's compassion is reflected in Jesus' feelings for the crowds, for we are told, "Jesus' heart was moved with pity for them." Jesus is the divine Shepherd sent to guide a

bewildered and lost crowd. God has kept the promise to be their Shepherd.

What would his disciples see as they looked out at the crowds? They would see an impossible task with enormous needs to be addressed. Jesus sees that, but still more: the crowds are a “harvest,” ready to receive and respond to the preaching and works of the apostles.

Or, is there another way of looking at what is happening in the story? Maybe Jesus himself felt overwhelmed by what his eyes showed him and what his heart stirred up. There were just too many people and too many needs for one person to address. When God took flesh, God also took on our limitations; neither the earthly Jesus nor can we be in two places at the same time. He sees that, “The harvest is abundant, but the laborers are few....” Most immediately, he wants the powers of God’s reign to be brought to people’s needs.

He isn’t asking that those in desperate need first conform to some pre-requisites imposed by “the kingdom of heaven.” They don’t have to belong to some special group or nation in order to be helped. They don’t have to qualify first as “the deserving poor” (a phrase I have always disliked, for the judgment it implies). In John’s gospel (ch 13) Jesus commands that his followers gathered around the table be servants to others. Here in Matthew the same thing is said in another way, “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons.” In other words-- - Go to people who need you and tend to them. Be sure to tell them that God is the source of the good things that are happening to them, or, to put it in his way of saying it, “As you go, make the proclamation, ‘the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”

How can these raw recruits and unskilled disciples ever tend to “the crowds?” First of all, they will be empowered to do the very things they have observed Jesus doing up until this point of the gospel. They will be given Jesus’ eyesight to see as he sees, the physical as well as the deeper needs of people; people “troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd.” The disciples will also have to pray for more laborers to come, which suggests dependence and trust on God for future help. When the prayer is answered, the disciples will then do as Jesus is doing today, they too will choose and commission still more “laborers for God’s harvest.”

Have these prayers for laborers been prayed? Yes, for many years now. Have they been answered? Well, we talk about a priest shortage, true enough. But every parish and retreat center where I go to preach is well-staffed with talented and educated religious and lay staff. The ministers are many, I see their names on parish office doors, “Director of Youth Ministries, Director of Faith Development, Financial manager, Director of Outreach, Director of Music, etc. It didn’t used to be that way, “when I was a kid”—I guess our prayers for “laborers are being answered and the preacher needs to acknowledge that today.

But let’s not leave the responsibility for doing the work of the kingdom of heaven just in the hands of professionally trained ministers and generous volunteers. Each of us is called to “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons.” Our prayers to the One who owns the harvest today acknowledges how much we have received from our generous God. Influenced by this deeper awareness, we then go and share generously with others through words and actions. Jesus didn’t have a perfect band of apostles, but they trusted in his word and did their best—and we gathered here for worship have been their beneficiaries.

It does seem that many see their religious practices as having to go to church on Sunday and making sure their children receive religious education. What they don’t see as their responsibility is what Jesus charges his disciples to do in today’s gospel—to go out healing and with a message. We have a large church near our house in Raleigh that has a day care center, bowling alley, book clubs, etc. Fine. But when church members talk about their faith will they speak with enthusiasm about the social benefits of belonging to their church, or how in their faith they have felt guided to a deeper relationship with Christ and other disciples? Will they also experience a personal call to see clearly the human physical and spiritual needs Jesus saw? Does our faith make any difference in our daily life away from Sunday-to-Sunday services? Do I see more clearly how I have been called and empowered to serve the needs of those “troubled and abandoned?”

Our prayer at this Eucharist could be: O God, help us to look at the world through Jesus’ eyes. Cure our blindness to those around us, sharpen our vision and quicken our hearts to respond. Send us into the harvest, for we are those laborers who have responded to the invitation of your son, our Shepherd.

A last note. Jesus seems a bit restrictive when he commissions the twelve, “Do

not go into pagan towns.... Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” This command is unique to Matthew and isn’t in the other gospels. Matthew was writing for a very persecuted church and at this point in his community’s history, it was largely Jewish-Christian. Jesus’ mandate here would have addressed the immediate concerns; they wanted their brother and sisters to get to hear the good news and join with them. It is like the concern each of us has to see family members, parents children, etc., share our faith with us. The vision doesn’t stop with the immediate needs the community had because later in the gospel we hear Jesus command to “...make disciples of all nations” (28:19).

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Stephen Vincent de Leers, WRITTEN TEXT BECOMES LIVING WORD: THE VISION AND PRACTICE OF SUNDAY PREACHING. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004) ISBN- 0-8146-2759-5 paper, \$17.95.

The book addresses the contribution Catholic preaching has made to the vision and practice of Sunday worship. It begins with a thorough two chapter review of preaching in the church since Trent and shows the changes brought about by Vatican II’s rethinking of the homily. The subsequent chapters focus on five characteristics of the homily: personal, liturgical, inculturated, clarifying and actualizing. Each chapter ends with a model homily to illustrate a characteristic. The last chapters guide the preacher through a method of homily preparation and suggest ten strategies for improving our preaching. This is a very good book and I learned a lot reading it, both in theory and practice.

QUOTABLE

The homily is be an inculturated word....our message must emerge clothed in the language and symbols of the people to whom we preach. This is not just a matter of effective communication, as in speaking the language of the people. The work of inculturation is fundamentally the work of verification. By drawing our images from the real lives of those gathered in worship, we verify for our people the truth of what we speak. As an inculturating preacher, you must “always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” (1 Peter 3:15). Or to put it in a way someone from Missouri might: “Show me.” Show me that what you say about God is true in my life and in the world I know.”

----Stephen Vincent de Leers, page 185

JUSTICE NOTES

AN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE PRAYER EXERCISE

“Seeing Creation through the Eyes of the Holy One”

(A Meditation of about two Hours for Anyone, Anytime, Any Place)

---Find a quiet place by yourself.

From where you are, focus on your surrounding environment

---How many different aspects of God’s creation can you observe from this one place?

—Use all your senses----look, listen, smell, and touch.

—Write down everything you observe. Don’t be concerned about not knowing the names of things

—Find one particular living thing (plant, insect, bird) that you can closely observe. Write a detailed description of it, noting everything you can observe. Include its relationship; with its environment. Be as detailed as possible

Meditate on the scriptural truth that you are God’s appointed caregiver of that living thing you have just described.

—How has your observation affected how you think about your responsibility as a caregiver toward that small piece of God’s creation?

Read Psalm 148

Take some time to pray, thanking God for all the creation surrounding you.

[---Anne Rowthorn, ed., EARTH AND ALL THE STARS”RECONNECTING WITH NATURE THROUGH HYMNS, STORIES, POEMS AND PRAYERS FROM THE WORLD’S GREAT RELIGIONS AND CULTURES.(Novato, California: New World Library, 2000) www.nwlib.com, Paper, \$15.95 ISBN 1-57731-106-X. Page 58.

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:.....

Scott D. Allen #0005091 (On death row since 11/18/03)

Terrence R. Elliott #0120236 (12/18/03)

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

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,

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

P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com