

“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:

While it is still early in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus calls his fledgling disciples to him and sends them out. This is not a hothouse religion he is founding. He didn’t lead those he called to a hidden valley where they could build a secluded monastery and spend the rest of their lives learning from him. Unlike the Jews who fled to the mountain refuge of Masada for protection from the Romans and for purity of religious observance, Jesus seems more bent on molding a band of mobile followers---a floating school of discipleship. It is more like a movement than an institution. Complacency and comfort should not be the air we breathe in our worship today. Rather, there is a stirring breeze (Pentecost named it a “driving wind”) blowing around this gathering. It fills the sails of disciples and makes us sent-apostles.

The disciples would spend their initial time with Jesus being trained for their future road trip. Before they can get too comfortable and begin to feel privileged, he sends them to preach. Thankfully he didn’t bring his disciples into a permanent retreat. If he had, we would have a religion specially tailored for nuns and monks in remote monasteries. Instead, the overwhelming majority of us are called to “go out”--sent by him into a needy world. (Even those in monasteries are called to have the world’s needs as a focus for their prayers; there is no escaping the call to mission.)

On a recent flight I sat next to a pilot who was hitching a ride back to his home. He had an impressive array of stripes on the sleeve of his uniform jacket. He had been a pilot for 25 years and gave off the air of competence that one likes to find in a person who is flying you 28,000 feet over the earth at 550 miles per hour. His uniform was standard, like all the uniforms of other pilots who worked for the same airline he did. What was different was a wristband he wore bearing the letters WWJD. I have seen teenagers wearing wrist bands or sweatshirts emblazoned with the same logo, “WWJD”---What would Jesus do? He said he tries to look at life and interpret it through the eyes of Jesus; how would Jesus respond in the daily situations this pilot found himself? (Since I don’t like flying, I also hoped it meant that when he was piloting a plane I might be on, that he

avoided turbulence---but that's my issue.) He does raise a point. Whether we choose to wear a WWJD wrist band, sweatshirt or baseball cap, or not---how does our world look to Jesus and what would he do? Well, let's look at today's gospel to get some clues; What did Jesus DO?

Prior to today's story (cf. chapter 9), Jesus had raised a dead girl, healed a woman with a 12 year hemorrhage, two blind men and driven a demon from a mute. His powers were remarkable and the people exclaimed, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel." What did Jesus do? Well before he did anything Jesus saw the needs of those around him. Matthew begins the account with Jesus' seeing, "At the sight of the crowd, Jesus' heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd." He didn't just pass through their lives; he noticed them. First he observed, then he acted. What he sees this time isn't disease or demonic possession, or even the people's sins. He sees that leadership has let them down. The preacher will need to discern with careful thought and prayer whether this lack of leadership on the part of those originally called to shepherd God's people applies to the local congregation and its leadership. This might also be a moment to affirm where such pastoring has been strong, forthright, healing and responsible. Wherever good leadership has been present in our current church crisis, Christ has once again named apostles to labor in the harvest, to "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and drive out demons?"

The English word "pity" that describes Jesus' response when he sees the crowd, is pale and ambiguous compared to its original sense. (People usually respond negatively to our ordinary sense of the word, "I don't want your pity!") Patricia Sanchez ("Celebration," June 2002, p. 267) says that the word used for "pity" in the original Greek (*Splagchnistheis*) is sometimes translated as "compassion." It is "the most potent term for pity in the Greek language. The word comes from 'splachna,' which means bowels." That's where Jesus's feelings come from for the leaderless, "troubled and abandoned" crowds ---down deep in Jesus' gut. The word is only used in the gospels to describes Jesus' feelings for those who are suffering (cf. 5: 32; 9: 22; 14:14; 20:34 and Luke 7:13). Gustavo Gutierrez says that compassion expresses Jesus' attitude towards those who suffer and is one of the unique ways he comes close to them.

On a similar note, Thomas Moore ("Spirituality and Health," Spring, 2000, p.5)

speaks about compassion. He says the ultimate teaching one can find across the spectrum of religions has a common denominator--- they all state, in one way or another, that if we give our life for others we will find it. Moore says that surrender of self (“the self stuff”) means responding to the call of service, justice, ethics, and compassion and is the “primary route to the deep self.” He says that the discovery of God, “the deep self,” comes in the ordinary ways we serve family, spouse, children and neighbor. He has learned, “that the spirit rarely appears as a tongue of fire over the heads of an expectant community. Frequently it emerges subtle and quiet from a choice or from a moment’s willingness to forget about the self and “look outward with a radically compassionate eye.” Looking at today’s gospel through Moore’s lens, we can say that in sending the apostles out to minister to the sick and those in dire need, Jesus is also placing them in situations where they will discover “the deep stuff” in their lives. So, even as they go out to be apostles, they will continue to be guided by the Shepherd. Their learning will not be interrupted by their going out; it will just have taken a different form. Those whom they will see in most need will also become the teachers of the apostles---if the apostles keep their eyes and ears open, as they would in the presence of Jesus.

Back to the wrist band. WWJD? Here is what Jesus does. First, he notices the needs of those who are suffering. His instinct, as Gutierrez reminds us, is to draw close to them, instinctively feel their pain down deep inside himself and respond to these feelings by doing something for them. Jesus sees that lack of religious leadership has caused the people to be “troubled and abandoned.” His response is to act on their behalf by making his “disciples” into “apostles”---those who will go out and speak and act as he did. They will “DO” what Jesus DID, “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, drive out demons.”

And they will give the gift free of charge. They will not make personal profit nor gain in personal prestige and rank over those to whom they are sent. For they will remember that the teaching and healings they received from Jesus came free of charge—the gospel was a gift. Always was--- always will be. It will take the rest of our lives and beyond to realize what a gift the gospel has been to us. True religious leadership --- called, gifted and appointed by Christ--- will carry the marks of the Good Shepherd in their lives of service to his sheep. How they act and speak in their lives will give proof that they have sat at Jesus’ feet and heard his message. By their “doings” (WWJD) they will give ample evidence from their

“deep self,” that they have heard the voice of Jesus sending them to those troubled and abandoned, the sick and the outcast.

We find similar faithful leadership in our church today among pastorally sensitive bishops, ordained clergy and religious who have reached out to us in honesty, compassion, with healing words and gestures. They have been sent to us by the compassionate Shepherd. But also remember, those originally sent by Jesus were Galileans. They weren’t from the center of the institutionalized religion in Jerusalem. Rather, they were from the fringe of the religion, the hinterland that was Galilee (cf. quote below).

So, from where else is Jesus calling and then sending apostles to our church these days? If we too are feeling “troubled and abandoned,” in addition to turning to the shepherds who have been faithful to us, we need to turn an eye and ear to other voices among us. These are the apostles from among the dedicated employed laity who minister in our parishes, schools, hospitals, social agencies and diocesan offices. Also include among these lay shepherds the abundance of volunteers who serve us in myriad ministries in our parishes. In addition, we who worship here today need to reflect on the gifts we have received from the Lord. How are we being called and sent to those in need? What gifts have we received free of cost and need to give free of cost?

It is also possible that in these troubled times the Shepherd is speaking to us through the voices of responsible media who have done us a valuable, though painful service, showing us the truth we have not wanted to face. What unusual “Galileans” these persistent prophets have been! Are they doing what Jesus told his apostles to do, “curing the sick, raising the dead,” and most especially, “cleansing the lepers and driving out demons?” Jesus has “caught sight of the crowds,” felt pity for us and sent us apostles in all manner of voices and appearances.

READERS’ RESPONSE

Reflecting on the “Body and Blood of Christ, Therese Groulx, O.P. writes:
I like the imagery of being feed/nourished by parents, family, friends, others. I have found even after parents are deceased their wisdom sayings come back to mind to encourage and help keep me on the right track. I never had thought of myself as feeding or nourishing others.

And this from Vivienne Moore:

Your last reflection reminds me how much I owe to Gil Bailie for my appreciation of Paul's Letter to the Romans. Gil uses contemporary literature and poetry to illustrate the timelessness of Paul's insight. Anyway, there are so many changes and shifts going on in the way we perceive the world these days--I think Paul's understanding of what it means to be human is especially relevant. Moreover, with the aid of new exegetical tools such as those provided through the work of Rene Girard's cultural anthropology, Paul's voice is now as immediate as that of T.S. Eliot or Bob Dylan or Flannery O'Connor.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Vigilio Elizondo, *GALILEAN JOURNEY: THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN PROMISE*. (New York, Orbis Books, 1983).

A reading of the Gospels through the eyes and experience of the Mexican-American margin in the United States. This readable theological study will help us see the meaning of the gospel message for those "Galileans" in our society. Especially helpful for those of us who preach in growing Mexican American communities or who want to appreciate the gifts of this large community in our midst.

QUOTABLE

Galilee was neither a religious nor an intellectual center; it did not wield political power. According to biblical literature it appears to have been outside the mainstream of Israeli life....

the Galilean Jews were regarded with patronizing contempt by the "pure-minded" Jews of Jerusalem. [As a mixed race, a person from] Galilee was a sign of impurity and a cause for rejection. The Pharisees looked down upon "the people of the land" because they were ignorant of the law. The Sadducees looked down upon them because they were somewhat lax in matters of religious attendance and familiarity with the rules of temple worship....

Yet throughout all this the Galileans maintained a refreshing originality in Judaism. It was a combination of the commonsense, grass-roots wisdom of practical experience, their more open and personal relations with foreigners and their relative distance from Jerusalem. Their hospitable and fertile land gave them a warmer, more optimistic outlook on life than the Judean Jew had....

The Galilean faith in the god of the [ancestors] was thus more personal purer, simpler and more spontaneous. It was not encumbered or suffocated by the

religious scrupulosities of the Jewish intelligentsia.

---Vigilio Elizondo in, GALILEAN JOURNEY: THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN PROMISE. (New York, Orbis Books, 1983) pages 54-5)

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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