

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 18th SUNDAY (A)
Isaiah 55: 1-3 Psalm 145 Rom. 8: 35,37-39 Matthew 14: 13-21
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Things are getting bad for Jesus. In my bible, the section (13: 53-58) before today's gospel passage is labeled, "Rejection at Nazareth." Even his own townsfolk have turned away from him. So, as we saw in the just finished parable discourse, Jesus turns his attention from the crowds and focuses his teaching on his disciples. These are the disciples who are the seed of his future community. But things go from bad to worse; Herod kills John the Baptist (14:1-12). When Jesus hears this he does the strategically smart thing---he withdraws from the crowds to a lonely place to re-group. He has got to figure out what to do next; he has a lot of praying to do too! But he doesn't get a chance to do as he planned, for when he arrives at the deserted place where he intended to be alone, he is met by a vast and needy crowd. Of course, he responds to them.

I am in St. Louis and people are telling me, "You have to go down to the river to see the arch." When you're in St. Louis people are just not speaking about any old river nor about the arches at a Mc Donald's. Here the "river" is the mighty Mississippi; the "arch" is the massive Arch that sits along the river at the city's edge and is visible for miles around. Every city or region I visit has something big to boast about; the Sears Tower in Chicago, the Golden Gate in San Francisco, the Rockies near Denver, the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and in New York---well don't get me started, that's where I was born! We are a country that likes things big, brassy and bountiful. When Thanksgiving comes along we will surely thank God for all our big "blessings."

Jesus, on the other hand, seems to be operating out of a different book of standards. Whereas we might add an exclamation point after the Grand Canyon (!), he would put one after five loaves and two fish(!). He gives special care to the loaves and fish. If I were Jesus, upon seeing all those hungry people staring at me and realizing how little there was to feed them, I would have been disappointed. And if I were one of the overworked and dismayed disciples, I too would have suggested that he "dismiss the crowd so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves." Makes perfect sense. I would have felt particularly frustrated with him when he retorted, "....give them some food yourselves."

The disciples are overwhelmed by what they see and the seeming insufficient resources they have. In this version of the story, there is no boy to provide the loaves and fishes for this miracle. The disciples have the food. Was it their own food for the trip? Is Jesus asking them to share out of their supplies? Is he asking them to risk it all, to take a chance at extravagant generosity? And they do—maybe this too is the miracle; the change in the disciples, who now have learned that whatever they have, it will be more than enough in collaboration with Christ? They are learning to cast their lots with him, to risk what they have in his service. As we heard last week, the person who discovers the treasure in the field goes and sells everything to buy the field to have the treasure. The disciples too are being invited to invest their all in Christ. Are we? Sell it all. Invest yourself in the One who will not disappoint.

I share the initial frustration of the disciples. I feel, frustrated and overwhelmed when I look at the world in which we live, see the huge problems. I feel insignificant, want to throw my hands up and just take care of my own life, as best I can. The world's leading 8 industrialized nations are meeting in Canada the week I am writing this. They are supposed to address the desperate conditions of the African nations. If they even get to that agenda, I really doubt they will make much of a dent in the continent's enormous misery. If the most powerful nations in the world can't solve such problems, what chance have I to make a difference?

I can't say for sure. All I know is what I hear in this gospel: Jesus took the minuscule fish and bread. Before he did anything, he said the blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to give to the crowds. And there was more than enough. I gather from the account that I must stop making excuses and get busy working with the resources or talents I have been given---the way Jesus did something with the loaves and fish he was given that day. First, I learn from him to give thanks to God for what I have that might be useful in helping others. And then, I must do something with what have. I have a Baptist minister friend who says you grab the nearest corner of the problem and get to work.

I also note that Jesus gives the blessed food to the disciples to distribute, instead of giving them to the crowds himself. As his disciple I learn from this detail that I should work in tandem with other disciples. Together we will be better able to attend to the innumerable needs of others that would otherwise leave us, as individuals, overwhelmed. All in all--we do better working as a church, each

using his/her talents where they are best utilized. If I, with the help of many others, help a hospital care for the sick, then maybe the sick will be healed, as they were that day when Jesus got out of the boat.

The Isaiah reading names the dissatisfactions we feel when we look for fulfillment in places that are not of God. We deceive and drain ourselves in a search for what can only be satisfied by God. God holds out a lavish food for us, free of charge; a food that will not run out when life tests us. We are being offered a food that assures us that, when the testing of the desert comes, we will find the sustenance for the life we need. God fed the Israelites in the desert and the Gospel reminds us that through Christ we are nourished in sustaining ways.

The Eucharist is like Isaiah's call from God to turn away from that which is not satisfying and will only disappoint. We have this liturgical celebration today to examine what we search and strive after and whether or not we are really being filled. We need then to rethink our unhealthy or abusive relationships, false priorities, -the value we place on achievements, obsessions with our careers--- any misplaced investment of ourselves. We need to have confidence as well, that no deserted place we may find ourselves is outside the compassionate gaze of Christ at this Eucharist. "...he saw the vast crowd and his heart was moved with pity for them....

We have Eucharistic ministers in our parishes who take the bread of communion beyond our assembly to those in "deserted places." That's often how the sick, dying, imprisoned, and elderly feel in our society--- deserted. They feel on the fringe of life, less than appreciated, less than valued. We send our ministers out to them with communion to tell them that they are part of us, part of the people being fed by God. They are not forgotten in their difficult places. The bread from our altar extends Christ's presence to them, but also extends our presence as well. We invite the Eucharistic ministers today to share this Gospel story with the sick and to tell them that the community has prayed for them and shares with them our life and hope sustaining bread.

Many of us have sat besides the bedsides of the sick and dying. We have seen them with tubes in their nostrils and with needles in their arms. We feel useless and fragile before the enormity of their suffering and fears. We feel we should step aside and let the professional medical experts do their specialties; what can

we do after all? The disciples in the Gospel experience that same helplessness; so many hungry and so little to give them. Yet, Jesus urges, "give them something to eat yourselves." Give them what you can. We feel we have nothing to offer in the enormity of their need. Yet we do have something to give, the gift of our presence, as meager as that feels. And so we make the offering of ourselves. Then Christ takes what we have to offer, blesses it, breaks it and gives more than enough nourishment to the hungry in deserted places. And in giving ourselves, we become the "true presence" of Christ to others. Aren't we being challenged to look into our own resources, as insignificant as they may seem, and take the risk for "the crowd"?

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Nolan, Joseph T. *THE WORLD, THE CHURCH AND PREACHING: THE BEST OF GOOD NEWS COMMENTARY*. New Berlin, Wisconsin: Liturgical Publications Inc, 1996.

Taken from the "green sheets", the author's commentaries on liturgy, preaching, society, justice and the Church that accompanied his "Good News" homily service. Very practical comments for the preacher on liturgical preaching in a modern parish context.

QUOTABLE

Are we to dispel this ignorance of the scriptures by school or sermon, class or Mass? Both, of course. But don't confuse the two. If we understood the power of the Word studied, proclaimed, and believed, we would not be running to new schemas to "cover Catholic doctrine," giving a "homily" on sacramentals or Catholic burial practices, giving up on the advances in understanding the scripture that have been made in the past thirty years.

----Joseph T. Nolan, (p. 101).

JUSTICE NOTES

ABOUT IMMIGRANTS

- Most immigrants, about 75 percent, enter the U.S. legally.
- Most, about 70 percent, come to reunite with family members; nearly half of the other 30 percent are refugees; the other half of those are professional skilled workers (source: the Urban Institute).
- Immigrants pay taxes, contributing nearly \$30 billion to the U.S. economy each year. And they use fewer services overall than native-born citizens.

- Immigrants start new businesses. Nearly one-fifth of all new small businesses are started by immigrants
- Most refugees and asylum seekers go through the process to become legal permanent residents as soon as they are eligible (usually after one year). Most go on to become U.S. citizens.
- Newly naturalized citizens vote more frequently than citizens who have been voting for a long period of time.

----from "Church," Spring 2002, page 36

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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