

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 19<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY A  
I Kings 19: 9, 11-1 Psalm 85 Romans 9: 1-5 Matthew 14: 22-33  
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Knowing the context of a biblical story is helpful. Last week we heard about Jesus’ curing the sick and the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. It immediately precedes today’s account of the storm at sea. I imagine that if I were one of the disciples at the preceding miracles I would have concluded that I had a real winner in Jesus. Imagine following a leader who could cure the sick and multiply food! Here, I would conclude, is someone who can take care of human ills and hungers; here is someone I don’t want to leave. Sometimes religion sounds like it is making similar offers; that it can help us stay on the right side of God and get us out of whatever predicament we find ourselves. If you’ve “got religion” and do things “properly” you’ve got protection and life will work out for you. Just do what you are supposed to do and do it in the right way.

Well, I knew a man in his mid-fifties who did things very well. A good man, he was a frequent church goer, excellent husband and family man. He was sincere in his religious practices and generous with his time for the needy. This very special man got cancer, fought a painful battle with it and a year later died. Didn’t he say the right prayers? What about the prayers we said for his healing? What more could we have done? Where was Jesus in his and our storm? We know lots of people with similar stories. When things turn out poorly for us or someone we love, we wonder what happened. We may even blame ourselves for not praying correctly or enough. Didn’t we follow the directions, say the right prayers, have the proper attitude, get enough people to pray with us?

Look at the disciples in today’s story. They listened and responded to Jesus’ directions; he gave them an explicit order and they followed it. Though I do notice that he “MADE the disciples get into a boat”—it sounds like they wanted to stay where the miracles had just happened and bask in some of the reflected glory that must have been coming their way as Jesus’ disciples. So, they got into the boat, without Jesus. Do we feel that at times?... That we have responded to Jesus and tried to follow where he leads, but storms arise that make us feel like we are separated from him and on our own to work things out? “Tossed about by the

waves, for the wind was against [the boat].” All of us can identify with that line, just fill in the blanks with our own personal struggles to serve the Lord on, what sometimes can feel like, stormy seas “with the wind against” us.

We can even name the individual stormy waves; the specific moments we feel adrift and at sea. The story speaks immediately to our lives; if not today, then yesterday; if not yesterday, then tomorrow. It can feel the way it did for the disciples: Jesus is off on some mountain somewhere, at prayer, while we disciples are caught in the thick of things. After the long struggle with the wind and the turbulent seas, Jesus finally arrives on the scene. Matthew tells us it is “the fourth watch,” ---that’s dawn. It certainly was a long struggle for those disciples in the boat that night. I want to ask Jesus, “What took you so long? Didn’t you know the troubles we were in?” In another storm-at-sea story they ask Jesus, who is asleep in the boat, “Don’t you care that we are about to drown?” There! That’s the feeling that arises after a long and lonely struggle, “Where were you; don’t you care about us and the storms we all face?” The church has occasions to ask the same questions, “How long will this current storm last? When can we expect you to make a showing and help us walk on water? When will we feel again your presence in the boat with us to make the winds die down as you did for your first disciples?

Maybe Jesus isn’t supposed to be “Mr Fix It.” Peter walks on a stormy sea, not one that has been made calm by Jesus. Jesus is there to help us in the storms and the reprimand he gives Peter speaks to us too, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” Only when he is in the boat with them does he calm the storm; he expected them to trust while the storm was in full fury; he expected Peter to trust while he was walking on the raging waters.

Matthew tells us that Jesus shows his powers to his disciples after he has gone off to pray. The evangelist seems to be implying that there is a link between his prayer and his power to overcome storms. We note the times Jesus prays in the gospels: before important decisions (like choosing the disciples); before his suffering in Gethsemani; and here in this story, before he calms the storm. Would some of the storms we face be more manageable if we put time aside for prayer? Our lives are never calm in the midst of storms and when things are frenetic prayer may seem like a waste of time. The stormy voices around us shout, “Don’t just stand there, do something!” But another voice whispers from this gospel today,

“Don’t just do something, stand there.”

Summer offers some space and time for us, longer days, outdoor settings, changes of scenes and schedules. Whether this is a stormy time of our lives or not, we could practice some form of trusting, quiet prayer. We could take a few more moments each day just to be conscious of Christ’s presence in the ordinary events of our lives; after all we haven’t left him behind at church on Sunday. He isn’t off on some mountaintop a long way from us. We could pause a few times this week and replay this story in our memories, especially as we face the ruffled waters of even routine events.

Why do we come here to church week after week? I think I come because I want to be with other “storm-walkers.” The waters we Christians face are seldom calm and coming here reminds me that I am not alone. In this place we have so many examples around us of people who have strong faith despite the turmoil life has thrown at them. Those faithful ones give us courage that when our testing time comes we will not be alone; faith will not walk out the door and leave us to make it on our own. Just as he did for Peter, Jesus reaches out a hand to those in need through this church community. We gather to remind ourselves that we have companions—people who break and eat bread with us and help us when the going gets rough. We remember with gratitude the times we did need a hand for courage and support and we received it from a brother or sister believer in the boat with us. Other times we are the helping hands for others. We look around at our companions in this boat: whom can we help, listen to, encourage and be with? Today’s gospel was passed on to us by our ancestors in faith, they want to reassure us, that in faith, we can be storm-walkers too.

#### NEW BOOK FOR PREACHERS

Fr. Leo Perez, O.M.I. and Fr. Ken Davis, O.F.M., submit an announcement of their soon-to-be published book [University of Scranton Press]. Here is what they say:

It has been said that one of the “best kept secrets” of the Catholic Church is its Social Teaching. The newly published book “Preaching the Teaching” is designed to bring that important if unknown message to the pews by preachers incorporate Social Doctrine into their homilies. The book’s chapters are written to be relevant to Hispanic audiences, even though other ethnically based ministries

could be helped by these suggestions. Each of the seven chapters begins with an important social document from the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops, dealing with such issues as domestic violence, discrimination, and capital punishment. These reprints are then followed by specific pastoral suggestions written by different contributors drawn from Catholic Bishops, theologians, and pastoral workers. Each chapter ends with suggestions for lectionary texts and different liturgical and civic occasions. "Preaching the Teaching" is a significant contribution to anyone who works in the field of homiletics or liturgical preparation, but especially to those who are charged with breaking open the Word of God for Latinos congregations.

### QUOTABLE

Nate Wills C.S.C sent some of his favorite Ann Lamott's quotes from TRAVELING MERCIES, to add to last week's quote:

"After we jump into the darkness of the unknown, faith lets us believe that we will either land on solid ground, or we will be taught how to fly."

"I do not at all understand the mystery of grace -- only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us."

"Here are the two best prayers I know: 'Help me, help me, help me,' and 'thank you, thank you, thank you.'"

Ann

### JUSTICE NOTES

In November 2000, the United States Conference of Catholic of Catholic Bishops issued a statement, "Welcoming the Stranger Among Us. Unity in Diversity."

This document calls our attention to our history, as a nation and as a church. It reminds us that cultural pluralism is our heritage; that we are a "nation of immigrants" and that the Catholic community is rapidly re-encountering itself as an "immigrant church," a witness to the diversity of people who make up our world and to our unity in one humanity, destined to enjoy the fullness of God's blessings in Jesus Christ.

"Without condoning undocumented migration, the church supports the human rights of all people and offers them pastoral care, education and social services no matter what the circumstances of entry into this country...that we also recognize

and strongly assert that all human persons created as they are in the image of God, possess a fundamental dignity that gives rise to a more compelling claim to the conditions worthy of human life.” The presence of so many different cultures and religions challenges us to truly become a sacrament of unity, rejecting the anti-immigrant stance that has become popular in different parts of our country....

As your bishop, I commit myself to continue the work of advocacy for laws that respect the human rights of immigrants and preserve the unity of their families; to encourage the extension of social services, improved housing, decent wages, better medical attention and appropriate educational opportunities, and I ask you for the same commitment. It is an issue of justice.

----“An Issue of Justice,” by Bishop Joseph Gossman, of Raleigh, in the diocesan news magazine, “NC Catholics.” July/August 2005.

#### 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:.....

John Conaway                      #0084604    (On death row since 10/19/92 )

Perrie Simpson                #0371096    (2/1/93)

Nathan Bowie                    #0039561    (2/5/93)

---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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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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