

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 3RD SUNDAY OF LENT (B)
Exodus 20: 1-17 Psalm 19 I Cor. 1: 22-25 John 2: 13-25
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I remember back in the sixties there was a drawing of Jesus that was popular among the young generation. He had a big smile, long hair that looked like it was blowing in a gentle breeze, and he looked about 25. He seemed to be a delighted surfer who had just come in on the perfect wave. I guess the intention of the artist was to make Jesus appealing to younger people.

There were and are other popularized renditions of Jesus. Not just the crucifixion or resurrection scenes; but those depicting him during his ministry. They show the gentle shepherd; the concerned healer before a tormented sick person; the provider in charge of the distribution of the breads to the 5,000; the seated wise teacher instructing his disciples and the gentle playmate with children. Depending on our situation at different times in our lives, we can be comforted and encouraged by such artistic interpretations. We look for the image that speaks to us in our needs. I wonder if there ever would be a time in our lives that we would search out an image of Jesus running through the temple with a whip of cords in his hand driving out the merchants and money changers? Not the most approachable image of Jesus, is it? Well, at least not at first glance.

John paints many versions of Jesus throughout his gospel; mostly they show Jesus in control of the situation he is in; even when he is hanging on the cross. Today's may be the most unsettling for a lot of us who prefer Jesus more "put together," more predictable and easier to take. In this temple scene Jesus seems to be out of control as he swings a whip, drives out the money changers, sheep and oxen, spills the coins, overthrows the tables and tells those who sold the doves to get out. For those of us who like an orderly and predictable religious experience, this gospel reading makes us squirm. What if there were a visitor in church today? What would they think of this seeming uncontrollable Jesus? He is like the unruly child at home who acts up when we have special guests whom we want to impress for dinner.

Well Jesus isn't out of control; it is zeal that fires his action and words. Maybe it is his zeal that so unsettles us. Will he expect us, his followers to be equally zealous? These days of religious zealots turned terrorists, any religious enthusiasm makes us

cautious of being too narrowly focused on our own interpretation of who God is and what God wants of us. Let's revisit the scriptures for some help in interpreting what is happening in the temple scene and how it may be speaking to us.

Unlike the synoptic gospels, John places this event of the temple cleansing at the beginning of his gospel. Thus, the story helps set the stage for what is to come in John's narrative and also helps interpret Jesus' identity and mission. The long-awaited messiah has arrived, and he is burning with zeal for God. The prophet Zechariah, speaking of the anticipated messianic time said, "When that time comes, there will no longer be any merchant in the temple of the Lord Almighty" (14:21). Zechariah uses a wonderful image to describe the total dedication of the people of God, "At that time even the harness bells of the horses will be inscribed with the words, 'Dedicated to the Lord'" (14:20). Jesus' zeal mirrors Zechariah's anticipated religious restoration.

Jesus' dedication is to the God reflected in our first reading from Exodus, the very familiar "Decalogue" or "Ten Words." The preacher may want to allude to the Exodus passage and highlight the God it reflects. This is not a God who wants to delight in the obedience of the people just because God likes subservience. The commandments begin with three "words" that stress our relationship to God. Despite the multitude of gods worshiped by their neighbors, Israel has one God. This is the God who has chosen, protected and formed them into a people. Note that the commands begin with a reminder of what God has already done for them. "I the Lord, am your God, who have brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery." They will observe these commands to show their reverence for God and express their thanks for God's gifts to them. Their observance will keep them in strong relationship to God and hold them together as a people. When asked, "Who are you?" the Jews could respond with certainty, "We are a people gifted by God." And to the question, "Why do you observe these commandments?" they could reply, "We don't keep them just because we are afraid of God and ordered to do so; but because they are our response to God's goodness towards us." This is the God of Jesus, the One for whom his zeal burns.

Back to the temple chaos. At first glance the presence of money changers and merchants selling oxen, sheep and doves seems crass. It reminds modern pilgrims of religious sites throughout the world surrounded by vendors hawking religious keepsakes. But in the light of the temple rituals and practices, these merchants were important. Judaism would not allow human or divine images on its coins, so

the Roman coins with Caesar's likeness on them would have to be exchanged for the proper temple coinage. Pilgrims, coming from afar, would want to offer sacrifice in the temple and so needed to purchase the proper animals for the ritual. There was even an assigned place within the temple confines for these exchanges.

But remember that Zechariah had spoken of a time when such business would no longer be needed in God's house. Jesus' actions are prophetic; they announce that a new time has come. Jesus is about to cleanse the people's spirits and fulfill God's long-awaited promises. Now Jesus' body is the sacred place of encounter with God and when this temple is destroyed, it will be raised in three days. In this new temple sacrificial offering will be made to God; no animals, no money changers needed. God is going to accomplish in Jesus a pure worship, a cleansing act that will do what the temple was meant to do: praise God in loving worship and be a place of encounter between God and humans.

Lent is a time to wake up to Jesus' desire to enter our temple, this worshiping community. He wants to sweep out what is crass, bloated and formalistic in our church. His Spirit wants to sweep through our prayer this day, firing our spirits with a new enthusiasm for God and God's ways. Maybe we could express our desire for this renewing and cleansing by putting more of ourselves into our prayers and hymns. We cannot make ourselves new, mere human zeal is not enough. But our enthusiastic prayer today can express our desire for God's breath to reinvigorate our too-accustomed spirits. Who was it who entered the temple area that day determined to make new and purify religious spirits? —the God of the Ten Commandments who reminds us in Exodus, "I, the Lord am your God, who brought you out of...that place of slavery."

QUOTABLE

I've never seen a statue cry or an open palm perpetually bleed, but I've seen the beauty of Arches [Arches National Monument, Utah] and been near the bedsides of courageous deaths, watched frail, elderly ladies speak truth to power, read about the complexity of a human cell, experienced the developing intimacy and tenderness of marriage through many ups and downs. Miracles enough for me. -----Rich Heffern in "Celebration," April 2003, page 158.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

In light of the statement by U.S. Catholic Bishops (June 15, 2001) on global warming and their call to “exercise stewardship,” in our use of natural resources, during these next weeks I will be sharing with you recommendations for how we can help the environment. Some are simple, some will require a long-term commitment. (I found these on the bulletin board of a retreat house; sorry, I do not know the original source.) We preachers need to recall the goodness of creation for our hearers and challenge them, and ourselves, to tend to what God has placed in our hands.

- Avoid purchasing products that contain halocarbons (e.g., Halon fire extinguishers, aerosol cleaners for electronic or photographic equipment) and other ozone-destroying chemicals.
- Let your elected representatives and relevant officials in the U.S. government know that you want production of all ozone-damaging products ended.
- Survey hazardous waste production and disposal in your community. Identify any especially dangerous problems and work for their clean-up.
- Support efforts by low-income communities to address their toxic pollution problems and to avoid receiving an unfair share of society's environmental hazards.
- Learn about the dangers of everyday household products. Reduce the damage you do to health and the environment. Then educate others on how they can do likewise.
- Support and work with national organizations that help local communities address toxic pollution and hazardous waste problems.
- Contribute to international relief efforts to provide clean drinking water in developing countries.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

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:.....

- Elton Mc Laughlin #0272408 (On death row since 3/17/93)
- Joseph Keel #0222263 (3/30/93)
- Rayford L. Burke #0057308 (4/1/93)
- John Burr #0058316 (4/21/93)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

Jude Siciliano, OP

FrJude@JudeOP.org