

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 4TH. SUNDAY OF LENT (B)

2 Chron 36: 14-17, 19-23 Psalm 137 Ephesians 2: 4-10 John 3: 14-21

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The first reading today might yield a suggestion for Lenten practice---keeping holy the Sabbath. Here's how I might approach it.

The older members of the community remember what “sabbath rest” used to mean. We remember the admonition not to do “servile work” on Sunday. It was “a day of rest.” Our world has changed much since we came to a quiet standstill on Sundays--stores closed; all work put aside; even outside domestic labors were not allowed, things like mowing the lawn or washing the family car. (Though mothers still had to prepare meals, wash dishes, change diapers, etc.) It wasn't that we were any holier, it's just that we had customs and even laws which prevented noisy activity on Sunday. For us city dwellers, there were neighborhood churches within a short walk. The churches were packed in my Brooklyn neighborhood. In the South there were morning and evening church services. It was a day for church and family. All that has changed, Sunday is just about the same as any other day and maybe even more frantic as we try to get in all the things we didn't get done the other days because of long work schedules, commutes, both parents working, kids needing rides, etc. Church attendance has dropped, and older parents worry about their adult children who seem to have "lost the faith." Have we lost the Sabbath in our lives?

The Chronicles reading spells out the causes of the fall to the Babylonians (Chaldeans) and the resulting Exile for the Israelites. Their destruction was a consequence of repeated infidelities to God, and so God let them suffer the consequences. The opening verses sum up their sinful condition, "...the people added infidelity to infidelity, practicing all the abominations of the nations and polluting the Lord's Temple." Later in the reading, the prophet Jeremiah is quoted, "Until the land has retrieved its lost Sabbaths...." Losing the Sabbath is somehow at the heart of the People's Exile, an exile from themselves, their homeland and from God. This loss of the Sabbath means more than ignoring certain sabbath laws and observances.

For the People of God, the Sabbath meant expressing their dependence on God. It meant stopping the daily grind of work and other preoccupations to acknowledge that life meant more. God had called this People to a new way of living in relationship to God and one another. For example, in this community of God's

People, faith in the God who delivered them from slavery would have expression in treating all people with fairness. In this community the least would be cared for, because God had cared for the least---the Israelites. Worship of this God would manifest itself in the daily life of the community where the widows and orphans would receive care. And more! In Deut. 5: 12-15 the Sabbath observance is extended to "the alien who lives with you." Even the stranger in their midst would benefit from this Sabbath rest, this moment in the week when right relationships would be expressed in worship and observance at home with the family. The day of rest was a vivid reminder that set the Israelites apart from their pagan surroundings. It reminded them of the dignity these former slaves had before God and thus it stressed the dignity of each person.

The preacher might thus address the restoring of "The lost Sabbath." Lent calls us to reflect on our relationship with God and how we express this relationship in our religious practice. Who is the God we worship and what expression must this worship take? Even with all the changes we have made in our church practices in recent years, one thing is still the same. We are not a solitary people; we are a community. Thus, to be Catholic (Christian) is to worship in community. Some will say they do not feel nourished in their local parish, they complain of formalized ritual, minimal congregational involvement and poorly prepared homilies. Since the change in canon law in 1983, Catholics have permission to go to other parishes to worship. Thus, worship is integral to faith, and this may mean that we may have to go hunting for a place where we feel a part of a community that expresses our faith.

The world is a tough place to make it as a believer---the daily forces and sheer exhaustion of our helter-skelter lives are just too much! Religious loners have a hard time making it, even with the best intentions. We need to be with one another; to be with others who struggle. We need to show by our worship that we acknowledge our dependence on God and our need for one another. We need nourishment too and God's Word and Eucharist are there to strengthen us in our journey. Our spirits need the break from the rush, the deliverance from "the slavery" of our jobs and burdens, a place to rest and be nourished.

But worshiping our God involves much more than ritual. The God of the Sabbath revealed in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament is a God who has called us to a new way of living with one another in community. In this new community all must be treated justly, especially those in most need. In this new community, all find "Sabbath rest." To "keep holy the Sabbath," to "retrieve the lost Sabbath," is a call to each of us to reflect on how we worship the God we

believe in, both at church and in our neighbor. It may also be a call this Lent to put some order and perspective in our lives. We may need to look to the deeper, the spiritual dimension of our lives and try to restore balance to all our relationships.

Notice how this initially harsh reading ends with an accounting of Cyrus the King of Persia. He is the one chosen to set the People free. God has taken pity on their situation and restored them through the hands of a Gentile. Cyrus is not an Israelite, yet he says he is "charged" by God to build a Temple in Jerusalem. All the People's hopes and longings are to be fulfilled at the hands of a pagan king. In a New Jersey town I saw a bridge in a park dedicated by the local Jewish community to Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat during World War II, who used his diplomatic status to deliver Jews from the Holocaust. He set up Swedish "safe house" to provide refuge and issued phony passports so as to get Jews out of Hungary. He is credited with saving up to 100,000 people from prison camps and certain death. Wallenberg disappeared after the war into the Soviet prison system, where he died. The inscription on the bridge labeled him as a "righteous Gentile." The Jewish community recognizes this non-Jew as inspired by God to do good. So was King Cyrus, a "righteous Gentile," through whom God worked to deliver the People.

The gospel reminds us of Moses, called by God to save the People from slavery. The bronze serpent was another instrument to deliver them from death. Finally, through Christ, the fullness of God's plan for us comes to fruition. God works through one like ourselves to save us. God's plan through both Testaments is to deliver us through human instruments, from our slavery and other forces that feel overpowering. The same plan, the same mode of operation, continues through us. Each of us is called to be a "righteous Gentile" (to borrow a phrase), to see where people need deliverance and to be that instrument working on God's behalf. We are reminded in today's Gospel, "Those who act in truth come to the light, so that it may clearly be seen that their deeds have been done in God."

QUOTABLE

I went to the Biography webpage and looked up information for Raoul Wallenberg (? -- 1947) Here is what I found.

Swedish businessman and diplomat, born in Stockholm. He took a science degree at Ann Arbor, then worked as the foreign representative of a European company run by a Hungarian Jew (1935--44). When Hitler began deporting Hungarian Jews to concentration camps he was sent to Hungary as a "diplomat" with the assistance

of the US and Swedish governments to rescue as many Jews as he could. He designed a Swedish protection passport, and arranged "Swedish houses" offering Jews refuge, saving up to 100,000. When Soviet troops occupied Hungary in 1945 he was taken to Soviet headquarters and never returned. On insistent Swedish requests, Soviet authorities produced a document stating that he had died of a heart attack in July 1947, but testimony of ex-prisoners suggested that he was still alive in the 1950s, and persistent rumors implied he was still in prison in the 1970s. Wallenberg was made an honorary citizen of the USA in 1981, of Canada in 1985, and of Israel in 1986.

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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