

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 5 TH. SUNDAY OF LENT (B)
Jeremiah 31: 31-34 Psalm 51 Hebrews 5: 7-9 John 12: 20-33
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The language of the gospel passage is strange, it sounds mystical. A person with much wisdom is speaking and his wisdom seems so contradictory to our "practical wisdom". We are aided and encouraged by the Jeremiah promise that a day is coming when we will have the law of God written on our hearts. True practice of religion will be set in our hearts and there each of us will be able to find knowledge of God. That day has arrived with the new covenant. We are assured that this knowledge is guiding each of us, and so we can approach Jesus' words with the confidence that God will open their meaning for us. Thus, this Sunday in Lent encourages us to approach the wisdom of Jesus and ponder his words and sayings for our life, confident that we will be guided in their understanding.

And there are words/phrases in this passage worth pondering. The occasion for Jesus' speaking these words is the feast of Passover, the feast of deliverance from slavery and death. On this feast Greeks approach Philip with the request to see Jesus. (Walter Burghardt, SJ suggests that the request of these Greeks should be written at the base of every pulpit to challenge the intent and content of the preaching, "We would like to see Jesus.") Jesus has been spending his time in a Jewish environment, but now these outsiders come into his life. God's plan seems to include a wider embrace than first thought, the scope of God is for all people. Philip needs to talk over this new factor first with Andrew, and then they take the request to Jesus. The request provides an opportunity for Jesus to exult and also reveal his troubled spirit. Remember in the beginning of this gospel John the Baptist points out to two of his disciples (one being Philip) that Jesus is the Lamb of God. So, in today's passage the Passover and the Lamb to be sacrificed come together. And non-Jews are requesting to see Jesus.

As I said, there are words worth pondering in this reading. One of them is "glory"; Jesus desires to give glory to God. Glory is when an special aspect or characteristic of a person is manifested. Jesus is the obedient one and his willingness to follow God's plan gives glory to God. Jesus gives glory to God by revealing an aspect of God. In his obedience, Jesus will show God's love for us. The paradox is that Jesus' death doesn't defeat him, it defeats "this world's prince."

Some things do seem to defeat us, have a power over us. We have experienced this especially in death. Psychologists say it is our greatest fear. We can take care of ourselves so as to live healthier and more productive lives; nothing wrong with that. But we might despair when we reflect that in the end, sooner or later, we die. Are our lives subject to frustration? Jesus will show God's glory; the power God has to defeat death.

And we suffer other deaths: death when we lose a loved one; death of plans; death to youth as we age; death in order to sacrifice ourselves for our children and grandchildren; death in marriage as we make room for another's way of being; death as we lose a job, etc. We can judge all this by the "world's" (a key word in John, meaning those who reject Jesus and his way) standards or by the wisdom of Jesus. Today he tells us that our deaths in love and sacrifice for others hold the promise of new life; the grain of wheat dies and bears "much fruit." The preacher might call to mind examples of those who have died to themselves but whose lives bring life to others. There are lots of famous examples of such people (Mother Theresa, Bishop Tutu, etc.), but a more local or "ordinary" person might put the example within the reach of our lives and open up possibilities for our hearers. There are people in our daily lives who have given of themselves for a higher purpose, for doing the right thing or for trying to be faithful in their walk with Christ. They exemplify the "grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies,and produces much fruit." For example:

- -the one who takes a stand to maintain justice in the workplace while putting his/her own promotion possibilities on the line
- -the teacher who takes a lower salary at a parochial school because she wants to teach faith and religious principles and speak more openly about God
- -or any teacher who, by their very profession, make less money than they might, for the sake of teaching and influencing the next generation
- -the person who gives a kidney so that a friend might live
- -those who sacrifice career advancement for the sake of their families.

The "hour" (another word from today's reading) has arrived for Jesus. This hour has been anticipated through the whole Gospel. Jesus is following a plan that will lead to his death and so he sees that "hour" arriving. But this hour will also embrace his resurrection and return to God.

So, the hour does not end in death. Thus, this moment is charged with possibility, "the hour has come." God visits us at each moment, and opens a way for us,

especially in the deaths we suffer throughout our lives (cf. above). God opens new possibilities for us and in this God's "glory" shines forth, bringing life from death. Each significant moment in our lives becomes a chance for God to enter and bring new fruit. This notion of "the hour" puts special emphasis on the present moment. Do we really "see Jesus" in this hour of our lives? We live so much in the past replaying mistakes we have made, past hurts, missed opportunities. Or we live in the future for the day when we will have graduated high school, gotten a better job, raised the kids, paid the bills, retired, etc. We look for some moment when we will have gotten through the present struggles, gotten free of the present responsibilities. But Jesus in his "hour", sees it charged with possibility by God. In the present struggles and dyings of our lives God is at work to bring out new life. We are invited to trust in God and be open to God in this moment, even in the endings and the ruptures of our lives. We can, with the Greek inquirers of today's Gospel, "see Jesus" in this moment of our lives. We look to him and his confidence and we place our trust in him to make our present moment bear new life.

"Judgment"--another word from today's passage. There are moments in our lives when we are judged. Something happens that requires character, courage or faith and if we have prepared well, lived our lives in God's light ("seeing"), then we are not caught short. Life asks questions of us, "judges" us: On what have we grounded our lives? Where have we placed our reliance? On what have we pinned our hopes? Will they sustain us when we are judged, or will they fail us?

Jesus is judging the "world" as failure, inadequate. With courage and a "troubled" soul he faces the future trusting in God to show forth in his last deeds. And, he invites us to follow him.

Finally, there is the phrase "lifted up": Jesus says when he is lifted up he will "draw all people to myself." We are reminded of those gory looking crucifixes in places like Mexico. They vividly depict the suffering of Christ on the cross. Maybe the poor, suffering and oppressed find them expressive of their own sufferings and feel Jesus understands their plight because he too experienced pain. This is true for all of us; Jesus' sufferings make him real for us. We all experience suffering and we live in a world that lacks love and inflicts enormous sufferings on people. Jesus' wounds, his lifting-up on the cross, help us see how much of our lives he took on. He draws us to himself because he was first drawn to our condition and entered fully into it, even to his suffering and death. But his

lifting up is also a promise that he will rise and so overcome death. Pain and suffering, death and oblivion are not the end of the story, we "see" Jesus and believe this. He draws us to himself and now we "see" that death is not the end. We are drawn to Jesus, and we too shall live with him.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Frank Kacmarcik and Paul Philibert, *SEEING AND BELIEVING: IMAGES OF CHRISTIAN FAITH*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 204 pages, hardcover.

This is a meditative book that will help the reader probe the deep significance of the sacred symbols in the Judaic-Christian tradition. The preacher will find it an aid to prayer, but also an opening to the symbols that are so much a part of the scriptural and liturgical context in which we preach.

QUOTABLE

Jesus' enigmatic saying about being lifted up presupposes a knowledge of Israel's Exodus journey and the incident of the poisonous snakes sent among the Israelites as a punishment for their grumbling. After many Israelites died, the people came to Moses and asked him to obtain relief from the Lord. When Moses interceded for the people, the Lord said to him: "'Make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' So, Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live" (Num 2: 8-9)

This image says *healing*: "Come here for healing!" Today we expect doctors to bring about physical healing by surgical and pharmaceutical means. Sometimes people approach medical dispensaries with the same attitude that they bring to the auto mechanic. "Find out what's broken and fix it!" But Jesus' healing is not the same as fixing. What needs to be healed?

We need to be healed of our mortality: our walking toward death is the ultimate wound that each one of us carries even in the vigor of life. That wound touches us frequently with its shadow of sadness and regret, especially when someone dear to us dies. We also need to be healed of our spiritual vertigo—our loss of balance—when we lose track of the purpose of living. We need to be healed of the spirits of

retaliation, envy, greed, manipulation, anger, and fear. We need to be healed of our unconsciousness of who we are.

----page 134, SEEING AND BELIEVING: IMAGES OF CHRISTIAN FAITH.

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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