

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 12TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)

Job: 38: 1-4, 8-11 Psalm 107 2 Cor. 5: 14-17 Mark 4: 35-41

by Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

When chapter 4 of Mark began, Jesus was sitting in a boat instructing the crowd and his disciples. The instruction has taken the form of parables. The first parable, about the scattering of seed on different kinds of soil, seems to sum up what Jesus himself has been doing. He has been scattering the Word to all who gather around him, but many do not get it. He focuses specifically on his disciples, who have made a commitment to him by following him. To these he gives special instructions, as we read in last week's Gospel selection (the passage immediately preceding this one), "By means of many such parables, he taught them in a way they could understand." Today's selection ends the teachings, and Jesus is once more in a boat. And once again, the disciples who have been receiving special training, still don't get the point of his teaching and his identity.

The disciples have had Jesus' special teaching and attentive presence. This was a chance for them to show that they had learned much about him---about his power shown in his concern and healing of the sick and about his power over evil, shown in his driving out the demons. They also should have learned of his special concern for them. But in the raging storm, they doubt it all: they doubt Jesus' power, as well as his concern for them. Surely Mark was not just writing all this to recall the past, rather, in recalling what had once happened, he is trying to encourage his own faith community who were undergoing persecution. Mark stresses in this Gospel, that the real sign of discipleship is trust in Jesus and who he is for us. Mark is challenging us to put faith in Christ amid the turmoil and storms that seem to be about to sink us. At the end of the account, Mark tells us that, "A great awe overcame them at this." It is clear that Jesus does not want awe or wonder at his powerful signs, but a trust in him, even when there seem to be no manifestation of power or miraculous intervention in times of crisis. The disciples are going to have to trust Jesus, because if they continue to follow him, the journey will end on the cross. Will they trust their leader even when he seems to be vanquished by death? Can we trust him when death seems to prevail over life and innocence and dreams and hopes?

The theme of trust continues as we realize the boat is an early symbol for the church, the Christian community. Certainly, we have our list of reasons why the church could not possibly survive much longer; we have our scandals, diminished

membership, a rapidly shrinking clergy, a generation of youth not trained in church participation as a former generation was. We are at sea in a violent storm, our ship is being knocked all about, we too shout, “Are you asleep, don’t you care what is happening to us?”

Mark portrays the early disciples in a poor light. They continually miss the point and they fail at every test of discipleship. Maybe Mark portrays them this way to help his contemporary Christian community see that Jesus’ prime identity is not that of wonder-worker, or “Mr.-fix- it- all.” Mark seems to be encouraging them and us to place our trust in Christ, whose suffering and death give meaning to our lives--- especially our suffering. The preacher has a chance to address the specific suffering Mark has in mind for disciples. It is the kind that comes from choosing to follow Jesus and living his life of service to others. Such a choice will bring suffering and deprivation with it. To follow Christ in this way is a voluntary act, a response to an invitation. We don’t have to experience the painful choice it is, if we don’t want. But if we choose to follow Jesus’ way then there will be power for us, the power of the cross and the power of service. Remember how this Gospel begins, “Here begins the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark gets right to the point of his Gospel. The commentators say that in these opening words, he is already proclaiming the divinity of Christ. He wants us to know whom we are following and know that this one will make his life possible in us, if we just trust.

The storm must have been truly terrifying since it has shaken these experienced people of the sea. In the presence of its terrors, Jesus is saying that they should have had faith. The notion of faith stressed in this reading is not that of assent to a system of truths. Rather, the word for “faith” that is used, has to do with personal loyalty, i.e., a commitment to a person. Jesus is accusing the disciples of letting the storm and their fear of death shake their faith, their commitment to him. Later in the Gospel, another “storm” will confront the disciples when Jesus is put to death. Once again their personal commitment to him will be shaken. In the face of death and the loss of the world as we have known it, will we stand firm in our personal loyalty and trust in Jesus?

Another approach: The preacher has an opportunity in today’s readings to struggle with the issue of suffering, especially suffering of the innocent. Where is God and why doesn’t God intervene when we pray to be relieved of pain, or when we pray for those suffering overwhelming grief? Isn’t God the all-powerful and aren’t all forces subject to God’s will, or at least God’s permission? When we are in a desperate situation and not rescued, or when a response seems long in coming, we ask the question the disciples in the boat asked--“Don’t you care that we are about

to die?”

There is no easy answer to the mystery of suffering. The all too brief reading from Job, the first reading today, doesn't carry the force of the entire book; an innocent man suffers and struggles with his belief in a just God. The Book of Job deals with his trying to make sense of his suffering. He confronts God with his arguments and gets the response we hear in today's reading; God is God and who is Job to question the Almighty? Not a very satisfying answer for the question of suffering.

The Gospel doesn't provide an answer, but it does teach us that the question in the minds of the disciples, after Jesus calms the storm, is ours as well: "Who is he?" Whether or not we come up with a satisfying reason for suffering, delayed responses to prayer, God's seeming indifference to our blight, etc., we do hear the message of the Gospel today. Jesus is teaching us disciples to stay close to him. We need to stay close to the one who died and is risen from the dead, (cf. the second reading), this is the way we have security through the most difficult storms; this is our consolation as we struggle with what seems to have no rational or adequate answer. In times of distress, it is a consolation that Jesus does care for us and has our ultimate safety as his complete concern.

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,
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