

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 13<sup>TH</sup>. SUNDAY (B)

Wisdom 1: 13-15; 2: 23-24 Psalm 30 2 Corinthians 8: 7, 9, 13-15 Mark 5: 21-43

Dear Preachers:

PRENOTE: We have just updated our preaching webpage. You can find it at <https://PreacherExchange.com> - Go to “PREACHERS’ EXCHANGE” for an article on preaching in Pentecost, a book review, thoughts on justice preaching, and more.

Like Lazarus, the young girl raised from death by Jesus, died again. Who knows the cause of her second death. Did she die in childbirth? Was she felled by one of the common deadly diseases that afflicted people of that time? She may have lived long enough to have children, even grandchildren. Perhaps, as she lay dying, they gathered around her deathbed and watched as she breathed her last. When she did die, once again there would be the customary funeral rituals. They would have hired flute players and a group of mourners. Neighbors would have heard the sounds and known that Jairus’ daughter had died—again.

Who knows, some of the older among them might recall how she had died when she was only 12. They would tell their young how her father, an important synagogue official, had put aside all the usual official prejudices against the preacher Jesus and gone to him, even falling down before Jesus, to beg for the life of his daughter. Sickness and death have a way of shearing through the veneer of our self-importance and social standings. They touch us at our most vulnerable place, strip us of our illusions and remind us that, no matter how important we are in others’ eyes, we are still human— limited and temporary here on earth. And so, Jairus’ daughter dies again, and Jesus is no longer around to help the grieving family. Did he perform that gracious miracle for Jairus’ daughter just once, a marvelous but once-only gesture of his power?

The Christian community that saved this story and passed it on to us didn’t believe so. They saw more than a resuscitation in what Jesus did for the young girl. It is clear they saw more in the story that would be important and relevant for us whose lives are all too often shattered by the death of loved ones. In addition, we too must eventually face our own deaths. Can what Jesus did for the girl have meaning for us today? Our ancestors in faith believed so, you can tell by how they tell the

story. They make hints; they point to the resurrection in telling this story. For example, Jairus asks that his daughter be made “well” and “live”. Both words have special meaning. In the early church’s preaching they were used to indicate “salvation” and “eternal life.” Our faith ancestors believed that in performing this miracle, Jesus shows that he is giving salvation and eternal life to the dead.

A troubled mother chats with me at a birthday party over coffee and cake. Her son is part of the Wave dance movement. He goes out to huge dances in warehouses and spends entire nights there dancing. She knows that at such gatherings the drug Ecstasy is used to heighten the sights and sounds experienced by the dancers. She asks for prayers. She has also been speaking to drug counselors so that she can know how to approach her son and get him help. Her prayers are that her son will get “well and live.” She wants to help him, not just to get him off drugs, but to find deeper meaning in his life. She hopes he will have the faith she has in Jesus and experience the love and support she has in her faith community. Like Jairus, she wants to take Jesus’ hand and lead him to the bedside of her son. She hopes that through her, Jesus might reach out and touch her son, raise him from the sleep that he is in currently in so that he might “live.”

There is a spiritual phenomenon described in the East as “waking up.” It may happen like this. We go through our busy lives running from one activity to another. We sedate ourselves in front of television late into the evening, grab some sleep and then start another rushed and too-busy day. We barely have time to see to the basics of daily life, much less tend to our inner life. Eventually, something interrupts this deadening routine. The possibilities are many: maybe we have a moment of dazzling insight about our lives and what is wrong and needs to be changed. Perhaps someone close to us dies or gets very sick. Our energies may falter due to aging. We go through a divorce because of a marriage long neglected, etc. Up until these events happen we are not yet “awake.” We were looking elsewhere, at what we thought made our lives “interesting,” “exciting,” “relevant” and “important.” But something happens to us, and we see now that we have been sleepwalking. What happened to Jairus’ daughter happens to us, we wake from a deadly sleep. Someone has reached out a gracious hand and raised us up. Resurrection has happened here, in this life, for us. The crisis we experienced has proved to be a wake-up call. We are “saved” and enabled to see more clearly our current situation and Who it is that is offering us life.

Another way in which we are raised up: It seems obvious from the story that the

girl has died, the mourners are announcing it clearly by their wailing. But when Jesus refers to her condition, he calls it “sleep,” which earns him the onlookers’ ridicule. Mark is noting for us what the Christian community professes about Jesus. Death is as sleep to him and what he does for the girl he will do for us, awake us from sleep. With faith that he has the power to do this, each of us can face our own death with the courage our faith in Jesus gives us. We live in a culture that denies death and worships at the altar of youth, success, control, health and power. Death unveils these idols and exposes their false promises. We sleep; we close our eyes and pretend we really are in control; but death seems to have the last word. It looked like it had the last word over Christ as well. His resurrection is our reminder that he has the final word, not death. We can look at life differently now that we believe our death is really a “sleep” from which Jesus will wake us. This faith in the resurrection will make us freer as we face life’s challenges. We don’t have to pretend we are not growing older; we can see our failures in the perspective of the eternal; we can surrender our control to God’s will; we need not fear that our life is over when our health diminishes and we need not feel alone as we face the powerful power of evil in its many deadly guises in our world.

Jesus instructs that the girl be given something to eat. What could be a stronger, more convincing proof that the girl has returned to life? Her eating is not just a sign she has her bodily functions back. In their culture, eating in the midst of the family was a strong sense of belonging and having life. You had life, not just as an individual, but as part of a community. The girl is given food by her family, and so she has been restored to full life. Who knows how long she had been sick and away from the family table. Now she is back to that table, surrounded by those who love her. The preacher may want to draw the parallel with the Christian and the eucharistic table. When we have been “asleep” to God, or “dead” because of sin, the living Christ “wakes us up” by forgiving our sins. We are then restored as a living member of the family of believers. We can again come to the table for the family meal, the body and blood, the very life of Christ.

A word about the woman who interrupts Jesus’ journey to Jairus’ home. She seems to have been a person of means. How else, in such a poor society, could she have afforded “many doctors?” Now, as a hemorrhaging person, she would be considered ritually unclean. She would not be allowed to worship in the temple and would be required to stay apart from the community so as not to contaminate others. How ironic, she who in her past might have known the synagogue official

Jairus, even been part of the same social circle, now would not be allowed to worship in his synagogue. Yet, need and their human incapacity to address their desperate situation alone, have brought them together. Now both, united by their need, and their faith in Jesus, are in the same community. Like us at this worship--- united by need and faith in Jesus, our superficial differences are put aside as together we reach out for him. But his reach is longer and through Word and Sacrament he reaches out to us, takes us by the hand and raises us up.

#### QUOTABLE:

Never handle the Lectionary as if it were a novel  
Especially in smaller liturgies, there is a temptation to "conveniently" put the Book of Readings somewhere where it is "out of the way," which often means on the floor or under a chair. Once again, the equivalent action would be to put a ciborium still filled with consecrated hosts under a chair or on the floor. We would shudder at the latter, but we frequently see nothing wrong with the former. The Byzantine tradition is the Book of the Gospels always remains on the altar until it is used for the actual proclamation. Many lecterns are being constructed with a "throne" for the Lectionary, so that immediately after use, it may be placed where it can be revered for what it contains--God's Holy Word. Yet, how often does one see a homilist put his notes on top of God's Word--or take the Holy Words and put them in an insignificant place, so that his human words can take their place? This might be considered by some as being tantamount to arrogance, if we look at it on the symbolic level. This seemingly minor action should not be overlooked either, since it deals with a basic symbol of the liturgy--God's presence in scripture and how we physically handle the visible scriptures. Liturgy is basically about helping each other find God's presence in the symbols which surround us, a long and oftentimes tedious process! Thus, we should not downplay one of the more obvious liturgical symbols of the divine presence.

-----HOW NOT TO SAY MASS: A GUIDEBOOK FOR ALL CONCERNED ABOUT AUTHENTIC WORSHIP, by Dennis C. Smolarski, S. J. New York: Paulist Press 1986, page 48.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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