

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 20TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)

Proverbs 9: 1-6 Psalm 34 Ephesians 5: 15-20 John 6: 51-58

By Jude Siciliano, O.P.

Dear Preachers:

Prenote: We have updated our webpage, "Preachers' Exchange" (www.PreacherExchange.com). There you will find articles on preaching the Psalms, justice preaching, a review of a book on the spirituality of the Psalms and more.

Jesus has performed a great wonder for the people; he fed 5,000 by multiplying five loaves and two fish. John makes much of this miracle, he sees in it a "sign" of God's multiplication of goodness towards us. The abundant food Jesus provides points to the abundance of grace Jesus holds out for us. (It seems we can't overuse the word "abundant" when it comes to what God is offering us!) Jesus invites us to come and eat. We who want the life that God is offering us, a life that is even stronger than death, are urged to reach out to Jesus, "the bread that came down from heaven."

The first reading from Proverbs gives us added insights into today's gospel. Proverbs tells us that Wisdom has "built her house... spread her table" and offers her food and drink to the "simple." Through the images of food and drink, Wisdom is offering what is life-giving;---we are invited to "eat" God's Wisdom. In John, Wisdom comes down from heaven embodied in Jesus. John tells us in his Prologue that God has spoken a Word. The very Word God used to create the world, has now become human in order to bring us eternal life. To come to know Jesus is to know the Wisdom of God. This Wisdom teaches us that on our own we cannot multiply life for ourselves. But today we are reminded that we are the fortunate "simple" who have found wisdom. Thus, we are those who are wise enough to go into the house Wisdom has built, sit at her table and eat.

As we hear John 6 over these weeks, we recognize many allusions to the stories of our Hebrew ancestors: the feeding takes place at Passover; the multiplication is in the wilderness, where Moses also fed the Israelites with God's "bread from heaven"; Elisha fed a hundred people with 20 barley loaves, the same type of bread Jesus multiplied (barley was used to make the bread of the poor); Elisha's servant told him the bread was insufficient, as Jesus' disciples did. Remember too that Isaiah had promised God would provide, "a feast of rich food" for all peoples, "on

this mountain." Jesus does just that, he feeds the 5,000 on the mountain, a very rich food indeed! While there are such symbolic links between Jesus' feeding the crowds and the Israelites' encounters with God, nevertheless, Jesus is doing something entirely new. He is establishing a communion between us and himself, as well as between all who sit at his table. It is a communion that will never be broken.

Several weeks ago, we heard God lament that the appointed shepherds had led the Israelites astray. God resolved, "I myself will shepherd my people." As we hear today's readings from John 6, we experience the fulfillment of God's promise: through Jesus we are led by the shepherd, "through the valley of death" along "sure paths." The table is set for us at this eucharist. The shepherd has "spread a table" for us in the sight of our foes and has provided a safe dwelling where we can eat together (cf. Psalm 23).

We have heard Wisdom's voice in the proclaimed word and now we, who are the "simple-hungry" find the best food and drink. God has again noticed our hunger and has spared nothing to nourish us for our continued journey through the wilderness of modern life. As we come forward to eat and drink we hear the promise whispered to us anew, "Someday, someday...all together in eternal life... no more hunger, no more thirst, all will be satisfied." Our preaching today, as always, is eucharistic. Through it we hope to prepare people for the eucharistic meal in which Jesus gives us his total self.

The preacher will want to point to some of the other ways our culture thinks it can multiply bread and feed us. For example. The latest technologies are such wonderful conveniences and tools. But are we a better, more loving and compassionate people because we have them? What kind of "bread" have they fed us? Are our lives truly better than before. Will we become still better when we get the latest upgrades we want? What we really want, and need is a deeper, more meaningful life—John's calls it "eternal life." Jesus is Wisdom enfleshed. He has built a house for us in his own person and invites us, "Enter here, eat and drink. I am 'true food' and the cup I pour is 'true drink.' This food I give will be true to you and keep you true to God and each other. 'Come eat of my food and drink of the wine I have mixed.'" Wisdom's food is lasting and offers what we cannot accomplish on our own--- but desperately need. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise you up on the last day."

To come to know Jesus, is to know the Wisdom of God. Jesus may have filled the crowd's bellies, but he is offering them and us so much more. Aren't there "signs" in our daily lives through which God continues to give us life and satisfy our hungers? This eucharist is a sacramental sign that encourages us to "see" the divine gift before us. And the eucharist opens our eyes to other "signs" God uses to teach us and feed us. So, today we celebrate the daily bread of divine Wisdom placed before us---- in good families and friends; dedicated people with whom we work, study and minister; in creation and its daily manifestations of God's love and care for us.

The words Jesus spoke must have sounded offensive to his hearers, for no Jew would drink blood. Eating his flesh, drinking his blood still has an off-putting sound to modern ears as well. During the eucharistic prayer today we will hear, "Take...and eat, this is my body....Take and drink...this is my blood." Most of us have heard these words from childhood; maybe their strangeness has dissipated for us over the years. Jesus straight-forward language serves as a faith reminder today. At this eucharist he is as close to us as the bread and wine; his life joins with ours in the eating and drinking.

Jesus invites us to come close, to acknowledge his presence and eat and drink with the confidence that in him, God has broken down the former barriers that separated us from God and each other. God comes so very close to us in Jesus. Are we hungry for this union? Do we believe in the One we receive at this eucharist today---believe enough to follow his ways? When we come to eat and drink it is a kind of "altar call." We rise from our current place in life and come forward to once again accept the One who is offering us an ever-nourishing food for the present stage of our journey across the wilderness. The eucharistic minister holds up the bread and says, "the Body of Christ." We say, with hungry faith, "Amen." Another minister holds up the cup and says, "the Blood of Christ" and we who are thirsty simply say, "Amen." As the first reading reminds us, "Wisdom has built her house...dressed her meat, mixed her wine, yes, she has spread her table..., she calls from the heights out over the city: 'let whoever is simple turn in here....come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed!'"

QUOTABLE

From my work with local pastors and seminarians, I am convinced that one of the practices that gets most shortchanged in the sermon preparation process—and one of the junctures that holds most promise for strengthening contextuality in

preaching—is the initial encounter between the preacher and the biblical text
PREACHING AS LOCAL THEOLOGY⁶ AND FOLK ART, Leonora Tubbs
Tisdale, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, page 104.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Quentin Jones' time is short. He is due to be executed soon. Our readers have twice responded to his requests for postcards. The response was overwhelming
Thank you so much. Dr. Bernadette Page is a regular visitor and correspondent with Quentin. The other day she visited him, probably for the last time. She writes:

I imagine that you get lots of requests for First Impressions, but I am wondering if you could ask one more time regarding Quentin. He says that the postcards that he has gotten are really important to him. He is amazed that people all over the world--Oregon, New Zealand, Korea, New York, Denmark, Italy, to name only a few, think of him and care enough for him to send a card, or to snap a picture and send it while they are enjoying a beautiful scene. He tells me that it is a great comfort to him that so many people are praying for him. He feels that is helping him to stay strong and peaceful during this time. He feels that he has received many blessings from many people. That may sound like I am making it up because it sounds so "churchy" ---but it is almost a direct quote from what he says. He is a very devout Muslim, a real spiritual leader to the other Muslim inmates.

I wonder if you would be willing to ask his many correspondents if they would do one more thing? email and/or call and/or write a note to:

NC GOV. MIKE EASLEY at: Governor's Office, 20300 Mail Services Center,
Raleigh, NC 27699-0300 Email: Clemency@ncmail.net
Fax: (919) 733-2120 or 715-3561

Tel: 1-800-662-7952 or (919) 715-4240

Ask him for clemency for William Quentin Jones #0219316 who is scheduled for execution at 2AM on Aug 22, 2003. In addition to telling him that you oppose the death penalty for Quentin, please ask him to declare an immediate moratorium on executions.

If anyone wants to write Quentin one last time and have misplaced his address, it is 1300 Western Blvd Raleigh NC 27606. But an email or call or letter to the Governor should be first priority, and a prayer for clemency, a moratorium, and peace for Quentin, his family, his fellow death row inmates, his lawyers, his guards (one of whom says he will resign if Quentin is executed) his victim and his victim's family.

Thanks, Bernie

JUSTICE NOTES

International Facts on Hunger and Poverty

More than 840 million people in the world are malnourished—799 million of them are from the developing world. More than 153 million of them are under the age of 5.

--6 million children under the age of 5 die every year as a result of hunger.

--Of the 6.2 billion people in today's world, 1.2 billion live on less than \$1 per day.

--The proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day has fallen from 29 percent to 23 percent in the past 10 years, although that masks significant regional differences.

--East Asia has seen a drop from 28 percent to 14 percent.

--South Asia has seen a drop from 44 percent to 37 percent.

--Africa has seen a drop from 48 percent to only 47 percent.

The amount of money that the richest 1 percent of the world's people make each year equals what the poorest 57 percent make.

The richest 5 percent of the world's people have incomes 114 times that of the poorest 5 percent. Malnutrition can severely affect a child's intellectual development. Children who have stunted growth due to malnutrition score significantly lower on math and language achievement tests than do well-nourished children.

Virtually every country in the world has the potential of growing sufficient food on a sustainable basis. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has set the minimum requirement for caloric intake per person per day at 2,350.

Worldwide, there are 2,805 calories available per person per day

Fifty-four countries fall below that requirement; they do not produce enough food to feed their populations, nor can they afford to import the necessary commodities to make up the gap. Most of these countries are in sub-Saharan Africa.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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