

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 21ST. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B
Joshua 24: 1-2a, 15-17, 18b Psalm 34 Ephesians 5:21-32 John 6: 60-69
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Prenote: Three years ago, when this Sunday's readings last appeared, I did a reflection on the Ephesians reading—"Wives be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord." I am not focusing on that reading this time, but since it is a rather controversial reading you may like to preach from it. So, we have posted that reflection on our webpage: "Preachers' Exchange"
<http://www.PreacherExchange.com> (There is other preaching material on the webpage and it has recently been updated.)

These weekly gatherings for worship aren't merely social get-togethers, chances to see friends and make connections. Rather, they should be opportunities to bond at a much deeper level with people who have consciously decided to do what is necessary to be Jesus' disciples. Somewhere else Jesus invites us to enter through "the narrow gate." Is he describing the width of a doorway that only admits a few select in the world? No. But he does describe an entrance that we must enter with deliberation and, when necessary, sacrifice. We have to leave behind all dependance on the usual baggage the world considers hallmarks of having "made it"—titles, accumulations, wealth, prestige, etc. We enter the narrow gate because we have heard the invitation to follow Jesus and are in the process of putting aside what does not belong to his way.

Most of us have been born into our religious tradition; but more is required. Throughout our life time, in many various ways, we must make and reconfirm our decision to follow. As in the case of Joshua ("As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."), our decision and example often affect those closest to us. Joshua was Moses' successor and, as Moses, he was given the task of renewing the covenantal relationship between God and the people. At the shrine of Shechem (associated with Abraham and Sarah), an appropriate place for re-commitment, Joshua leads the chosen people in renewing the covenant with God. They willingly declare their allegiance because they know their God—in specifics. They can name the things God has done for them—delivering them from slavery, leading and nurturing them through the desert and protecting them from their enemies. They remember their God, the One who delivers, feeds, instructs,

sustains, protects and guides them while they travel.

We can imagine ourselves this day at our "new Shechem"—the place of remembrance and renewal. We don't just "go to church," we gather with the household of descendants of our ancestors in faith. We remember our God's great acts on our behalf when we hear the scriptures proclaimed---which Jesus describes as words of "Spirit and life." With renewed memory we too decide to join Joshua in a clear statement of faith in saying, "we will serve the Lord." We come to eucharist as a sign of the renewed covenant with God and at the same time receive the Life that enables us not just to "go to church," but to live a renewed life in God's household.

In addition to our community's memory of what God had done for us, we have personal specifics to add to the list of reasons to recommit to God today. We look back over our life, its joyful and arduous moments and can name the crucial times when God deepened our joy or delivered us from sin, destructive behavior, powerful addictions, discouragement, self-doubt, aimlessness, etc. We can recount moments when help came our way in the form of someone reaching out to us or our family. We have known the treasured and invaluable support of spouse, family and friends during the bleak times. Like Joshua and the rescued people of God, we have been delivered, fed, instructed, sustained, protected and guided on our way. With these vivid personal reminders, we join the chorus of voices around us today, singing hymns of praise, proclaiming our "Amens" and praying fervently for help to fulfill our commitments. In other words, together we are saying, "...we will serve the Lord."

The last weeks we have had a summer break from Mark and been hearing readings from John 6. Today we conclude these readings; next week we will return to Mark. As in the Joshua reading, John 6 ends today with a challenge—whom will we serve? Jesus doesn't make it easy for the disciples; he's not out for numbers. He is looking for faithful followers, people who will make a difference in the "household"—at home, in the community and in the world. The crowd has already turned away; but now, "many of his disciples returned to the former way of life and no longer accompanied them." They have heard Jesus correctly; it will cost them to continue following him. He is offering a bread that will require commitment to him and rejection of false breads. He is too much for them. He leaves them free to choose and they decide to go their own way.

Those disciples were no weaker; no less perceptive; no more fixed in their ways than we. They were given a choice and at least they were perceptive enough to realize that following Jesus involved much more than church attendance and committee work. I guess if I had just heard what Jesus said (as we have these past Sundays) and were struggling with whether or not to stay with him, I would have appreciated his doing one big sign--- something spectacular to push me beyond the edge of my reluctance into faith. I would have also liked a little softening of his teaching, some pabulum form to make it easier to swallow. But no! Instead, we are asked, "Do you also want to leave?"

Simon Peter speaks up and we notice John's combination of his old and new names--as if to say, he isn't "done" becoming a full disciple, there still is a lot of the old man left. Simon Peter doesn't have the full conviction yet, the strong tones of Joshua. Jesus is asking for everything and Simon Peter and the others standing with him (in "ranks before God"--cf. the first reading) make a tepid response, "To whom shall we go?" Not exactly a ringing faith declaration. Not exactly a statement for future generations to add to their creedal formulas. Nevertheless, Jesus takes the meager gift Simon Peter, and the others are offering and will transform it later, after his resurrection, with his own more generous and fiery Spirit.

The disciples will need that Spirit. In John the "flesh" is a symbol for our human life on its own.

This "natural life" is not enough to provide the deeper life we need to serve the Lord and lead the faithful lives that yield eternal life. The gifts of ourselves we offer today, symbolized by the bread and wine, also seem meager in light of the self-offering Jesus made for us--- and is asking of us. Nevertheless, our gifts are received and once again transformed by the Spirit. The Word we hear today and the living Bread we eat, are more than enough for us. They will not pass away, but will enliven our human spirits, encouraging us to say with all our hearts, "we will serve the Lord!"

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

AIDS in the African American Community

Facts:

- Of the estimated 40,000 new HIV infections each year, greater than 50% occur among African Americans
- African Americans accounted for 57% of the cases among women
- African Americans men accounted for 39% of new cases
- 58% of total AIDS cases among children are Black
- For African Americans 25-44 years of age, HIV was the leading cause of death in 1998

How Can You Help?

- Encourage pastors to preach sermons on HIV/AIDS and the role of the Church
 - Organize parish organizations or Catholic organizations to say special prayers for the eradication of AIDS
 - Distribute through parish and other organizations educational material on HIV/AIDS
- (recommendations from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Samuel Flippen #0130851 (On death row since 5/26/97)
 - Shawn D. Bonnett #0037251 (9/27/96)
 - James F. Davis #0510234 (10/2/96)
 - Jerry Hamilton #0163746 (3/5/97)
- Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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