

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 23RD. SUNDAY (B)
Isaiah 35:4-7a Psalm 146 James 2: 1-5 Mark 7: 31-37
By Jude Siciliano, OP.

Dear Preachers:

Prenote: As we get closer to the elections here in the United States, we preachers will want to address our listeners in ways that call attention to the obligation Christians have to responsible citizenship. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops has once again published a document that reflects issues we all need to be attend to this November. Thus, in this and subsequent “First Impressions” we will be including segments of the bishops’ document, FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP: CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM. I hope this will help our preachings address some important issues during the election season. (Cf. below)

I would also direct your attention to our READER FEEDBACK section towards the end of this edition.

Isaiah 35 is in sharp contrast to the chapter that just preceded it. Chapter 34 has just described the terrible disasters that would befall the land. Now, as immediate consolation (God doesn't wait long to bring consolation), Chapter 35 presents the other side of the coin, a time of wellbeing, of almost paradisaal harmony, will come upon the earth. Isaiah is writing during the exile in Babylon; the people are in desperate straits. In former times, when help was needed, God chose a leader, a judge, to speak and act on God's behalf and help Israel overcome its enemies. Now however, God is promising to come in person to rescue the people. (This reading has Advent tones to it, and, in fact, is used during one of the days in Advent.) The signs of God's coming are spelled out; they are physical and will signal the liberation of the whole person and of all the people.

This reading became a focus of messianic hopes. When the messiah did come, there would be clear signs that God had come to help the people. Thus, when the people saw these signs accomplished in their midst, they would know that restoration was at hand. The reading points to today's Gospel and shows Jesus fulfilling just what was promised. God has made a promise and now God is fulfilling it in Jesus.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is always going from place to place, he is a whirlwind of constant motion. However, Mark rarely tells us where he is, we have trouble pinpointing his location. If Mark does not tell us where Jesus is, then he must be

focusing on something else--what Jesus is saying and doing. In fact, as in today's gospel, most of the time Mark doesn't even give names to the people Jesus is curing. What is clear about the man in this story is that he is deaf and Jesus cures him. Mark breaks the pattern for us today; he does tell us where this story takes place. It is in "the district of the Ten Cities (Decapolis)". The location is important for Mark and his readers; Jesus is clearly in pagan territory. Mark wants us to note that. Jesus is proclaiming the gospel among the Gentiles. Mark also includes two feeding miracles, one prior to this story and another after it. He feeds 5,000 on one side of the lake and 4,000 on the other. As we say, Jesus is "working both sides of the street." Jesus is trying to draw together those who have been opposites. He does that in himself as well, uniting the opposites of the divine and human. His life is one of reconciliation, drawing together what seems irreconcilable.

The signs he performs also speak of his restorative work. He tells them not to tell anyone about the miracle so that he is not spoken of and heard about as just a miracle worker. People are deaf to his true identity and need to hear more from him. He wants them to hear that he is fulfilling their deepest desires, to hear about his reconciling all divisions within our spirits and within the human community.

The Eucharist we celebrate presents to us the accomplishment of his task. The meal celebrates that he has brought us into union with God and healed the sinful nature that has divided our spirits. When the community eats this common meal today, we also celebrate our union with one another. We sit down at table to eat and in so doing, we are to put our divisions aside.

Therefore, before we approach the altar we may need to examine the "state of the union"---have we set ourselves apart from anyone? From any class or group of people? Who lives "on the other side of the lake" from us? We invite Jesus today, through this meal of unity, to help us "cross the lake to the other side" and to be with us as we seek ways to be reconciled with one another.

Mark does continue the pattern of not naming the one Jesus is curing. Even when the man is cured, he is not named, nor do we know what he says when he "began to speak plainly." Here is another story that focuses on what Jesus says and does. If no name is given, then the man can represent every person. This miracle applies to each of us. How are we deaf and to whom have we turned a deaf ear?

The second reading suggests we may be indifferent or "deaf" to the poor. Have we

as a people turned a deaf ear to the poor? Do we, and our political leaders, pay more attention to those "fashionably dressed," those with more political clout? James is even more specific since he addresses his words to "my brothers and sisters." He is speaking to the church community. In our liturgical gatherings the real nature of the church is revealed. Are we an assembly where all feel welcome? Do the poor as well as the wealthy get acknowledged, "heard"? Or are we also deaf? The preferences we pay to the well-to-do may not be glaringly obvious, but the poor pick them up and know what it feels like to be 2nd class, both in the world and alas, even in our Christian communities.

(Here is a moment for the preacher's own examination of conscience as well: when we use illustrations in our preaching, who are included and who are excluded? Do we always use examples of white, middle-class people? Of two parent homes? Of people with education? Do we male preachers construct a world from only a male perspective? Illustrations help people image a world and so, what world do our images paint for people? The world we build through the illustrations we use; will be the world we are saying God populates. If people don't hear their experience in the preaching then they will conclude, at least on an unconscious level, that God does not inhabit their world, their experience. So, watch your illustrations.) Thus, the miracle is addressed to anyone; fill in the blanks with your own name. Mark makes it clear the miracle is meant for the Christian community, he saves the Aramaic word "Ephphatha" in narrating the miracle. It was a word from the baptismal rite. Christians heard this word when it was said over their ears to open them up to hear the Word of God. This story becomes our story, for in baptism we were given our hearing---our ears were opened to hear correctly. We are called to hear one another, to listen to each other's joys, sorrows, hungers and needs.

When the man does hear, he can "speak plainly." That's our story too, we have heard God's Word and we have heard the needs of the world through the filter of that Word. Now we too must speak plainly. Our first "plain" words are words of praise for the God who comes in person to rescue us. This liturgical celebration speaks those words plainly. The preacher may want to find such words of praise and thanks in the liturgical prayers as examples of these "plain words" of praise. We have heard what God has done for us, and we are responding together to these wonderful acts. God has seen us in exile and come to set us free, has opened the ears of the deaf and the eyes of the blind. Proclamation follows hearing.

Our next "clearly spoken words" are about God to others. Proclamation speaks

from having heard. James reminds us that those who have heard should not be deaf to the poor who join us in faith, nor to those who have not yet heard about the God who saves us. Isaiah says it plainly, "Say to those whose hearts are frightened, 'Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God who comes with vindication.'"

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

StuhlmueLLer, Carroll, ed. THE COLLEGEVILLE PASTORAL DICTIONARY OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996.

The best of American biblical and pastoral theologians have put this collection together to honor Carroll StuhlmueLLer. The emphasis is pastoral, and so it is a great aid for those needing material that would be useful for preaching, teaching and liturgy. Shows the influence of the bible on the pastoral and liturgical life of the Church. Also good for retreat preaching when background material is needed for conferences based on biblical themes, e.g. desert, discipleship, Eucharist, etc.. It's a great resource book and, you guessed it, it's expensive!

QUOTABLE:

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS / UNITED STATES
CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP: CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM

Introduction

The year 2000 marks a great spiritual milestone and offers an important civic challenge. For Christians, this year represents the coming of the Great Jubilee, marking the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ. For U.S. citizens, this year brings the election of those who will lead our government into a new century and a new millennium.

For U.S. Catholics, these two events bring special responsibilities and opportunities. This is a time to bring together the guidance of the Gospel and the opportunities of our democracy to shape a society more respectful of human life and dignity, and more committed to justice and peace.¹

Challenges for Believers

Our nation has been blessed with great freedom, vibrant democratic traditions,

unprecedented economic strengths, abundant natural resources, and a generous and religious people. Yet not all is right with our nation. Our prosperity does not reach far enough. Our culture does not lift us up; instead, it may bring us down in moral terms. This new world we lead is still too dangerous, giving rise to ethnic cleansing and an inability to confront hunger and genocide. We are still falling short of the American pledge of "liberty and justice for all," our declaration to defend the inalienable rights of the human person—"life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Signs of the challenges surround us:

- a. 1.4 million children are destroyed before birth every year. In many cities, a majority of our children never see the day of their birth.
- b. The younger you are, the more likely you are to be poor. A quarter of our preschool children are growing up poor.
- c. We watch with horror as some schools become almost war zones. Too many of our young people have lost their moral direction, their sense of belonging, and even their will to live. More and more they are finding community in gangs and cliques, instead of family and faith.
- d. Hate and intolerance haunt our nation and turn the diversity we should celebrate into a source of division, bigotry, racism, and conflict.
- e. A powerful economy pushes our nation forward, but it widens the gaps between rich and poor in our nation and around the world. Some Americans are moving far ahead, but too many are being left behind.
- f. Families are facing serious challenges. Millions do not have basic health care, many cannot afford housing, and in rural areas, many family farmers are losing their way of life.
- g. Scandal, sensationalism, and intense partisan combat diminish public life. Too many of our leaders seem to focus more on seeking campaign contributions than the common good.
- h. Violence surrounds us. War, ethnic cleansing, religious persecution, the denial of other human rights, poverty, debt, and hunger destroy the lives and dignity of tens of thousands each year.

The next millennium requires a new kind of politics, focused more on moral principles than on the latest polls, more on the needs of the poor and vulnerable than the contributions of the rich and powerful, more on the pursuit of the common good than the demands of special interests. As Catholics and as voters, this is not an easy time for faithful citizenship. By this we mean more than people who consistently participate in public life, but disciples who view these responsibilities through the eyes of faith and bring their moral convictions to their civic tasks and choices. Sometimes it seems few candidates and no party fully reflect our values. But now is not a time for retreat. The new millennium should be an opportunity for renewed participation. We must challenge all parties and every candidate to defend human life and dignity, to pursue greater justice and peace, to uphold family life, and to advance the common good.

We hope the campaigns and elections of the year 2000 become turning points in our democracy, leading to more participation and less cynicism, more civil dialogue on fundamental issues and less partisan posturing and attack ads. Let us turn to a new century with renewed commitment to active citizenship and to full democratic participation.

READER FEEDBACK

Here's some feedback on the Ephesians 5: 21-32 reflections from August 27th.

Dear Jude,

Thanks for your carefully worked out and caring homily for Sunday. In reference to it, I have a few thoughts I would like to share with you. Since I come from a family where my mother was considered a real partner, and certainly not a person who had to worry about subjection, I never considered this text relevant to my family life; but I got interested in it when I met women who actually translated it literally, and I found that it had a strong negative influence on their marriage. Consequently, I feel that the offense taken by women is legitimate.

1. The offensive submissive section in reference to women is often considered balanced by the "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church," etc., a beautiful text. However, loving husbands are not terribly in need of it. Controlling husbands interpret it to mean that their form of control is "loving." To love as Christ loved takes a lifetime; whereas submissiveness can be demanded immediately, and the woman still is placed at a disadvantage.
2. The text is ripe for misinterpretation. Homilies are not always helpful, even good ones, because the literal meaning is so convenient to go back to.

3. Even the Bishops' statement "When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Violence against Women" says that abusers use the text to support their right to batter (p. 7).

4. Concerning the question of using the short or the long form. The part of the text that says. "Slaves, be subject to your masters as to the Lord" is not read on Sundays. I mentioned this once to a presider, saying that if the whole household code were read, the congregation would be able to better understand that the text concerning "wives, be subject" is culturally conditioned. He said that the "slaves, be subject" text isn't read because it isn't relevant. Consequently, in many people's minds the text has gotten lost. Could not the same happen to the part of the text that refers to wives?

5. One of the best ways to render something irrelevant is to ignore it (e.g. the need for inclusive language). If the passage weren't read, fourteen-year-olds would not have it impressed on their psyche, then and years later.

6. Pope John Paul's apostolic letter "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women" says of the text in question: "However, the awareness that in marriage there is mutual 'subjection of the spouses out of reverence for Christ,' and not just that of the wife to the husband, must gradually establish itself in hearts, consciences, behavior and customs" (84). I have never heard a homilist refer to this passage.

Thanks, again, Jude for your [reflections] which I think addressed the question in helpful ways.

Rose Bowen, O.P.

Another response on the same scripture passage:

Dear Father Jude,

Thanks for your reflections. I really enjoy them. But I wonder if on the topic of the submission of wives to their husbands if you are not reading this bit of Scripture through the filter of the present time just as the writer was viewing the topic through the cultural filters of his time. Maybe the language sounds offensive to some of us because of what we bring to it by way of modern prejudices and assumptions. You seem to suggest that submissiveness is somehow a bad thing. Of course, no Christian can justify a man's lording over his wife, but we all submit to one another in various ways. I think Jesus was the ultimate role model when it comes to submissiveness. He submitted to crucifixion. And he also washed the feet of his disciples. So, submission in and of itself is not necessarily some kind of acceptance of abuse. But in these days of self-actualization and self-empowerment maybe it seems so. I think men

and women--wives and husbands--do have different roles in God's plan. And while cultures change, there will never be "equality" in the sense that we are all the same. Yes there should be equality in the sense of respect and honor and love, but there will always be differences in men and women. The joy--and pain--of giving birth, for example, is something that men will never know. The reverence we all have for woman and mothers because of that physical bond formed between mothers and their children is a special gender-related honoring that men don't share in. Men are not superior to women and should not be domineering or arrogant. But maybe Scripture is telling us that there are ways that wives should be submissive to their husbands--not in a subservient way but in the loving way Jesus was submissive. The heightened feminist sensitivity of today, while in some ways a natural product of past oppression of women, may be getting in the way of our understanding of the true Scriptural message. Christ's power to save was actualized only with his willingness to submit to God's plan even though it might have seemed offensive to Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. I just don't see how the inspired Word of God can be "offensive." If something seems offensive to us, I think we are not translating it correctly or perhaps not interpreting it properly. If one of us says this passage here is offensive, what's to stop someone else from saying that passage there is also offensive. And then what becomes of our belief in Revelation?

With Love, Larry O'Connor

One of our readers sent this story for possible use in a preaching:

A young and successful executive was traveling down a neighborhood street, going a bit too fast in his new Jaguar. He was watching for kids darting out from between parked cars and slowed down when he thought he saw something. As his car passed, no children appeared, instead, a brick smashed into the Jag's side door!

He slammed on the brakes and spun the Jag back to the spot from where the brick had been thrown. He jumped out of the car, grabbed some kid and pushed him up against a parked car, shouting, "What was that all about and who are you? Just what the heck are you doing?!!" Building up a head of steam, he went on. "That's a new car and that brick you threw is gonna cost a lot of money. Why did you do it?!!"

"Please, mister, please, I'm sorry-I didn't know what else to do!" pleaded the youngster. "I threw the brick because no one else would stop....."

Tears were dripping down the boy's chin as he pointed around the parked car. "It's my brother," he said. "He rolled off the curb and fell out of his wheelchair and I can't lift him up." Sobbing, the boy asked the executive, "Would you please help me get him back into his wheelchair? He's hurt and he's too heavy for me."

Moved beyond words, the driver tried to swallow the rapidly swelling lump in his throat. He lifted the young man back into the wheelchair and took out his handkerchief and wiped the scrapes and cuts, checking to see that everything was going to be okay.

"Thank you, sir. And God bless you" the grateful child said to him. The man then watched the little boy push his brother down the sidewalk toward their home. It was a long walk back to his Jaguar... a long, slow Walk.

He never did repair the side door. He kept the dent to remind him not to go through life so fast that someone has to throw a brick at you to get your attention. Life whispers in your soul and speaks to your heart. Sometimes, when you don't have the time to listen...Life throws a brick at your head.

It's your choice: Listen to the whispers of your soul or wait for the brick.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,
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