

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 24TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)

Isaiah 50: 5-9a Psalm 59 James 2: 14-18 Mark 8: 27-35

Dear Preachers:

Prenote: In our “Quotable” section, we have another excerpt from the Catholic Bishops’ election year document, FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP: CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM. The preacher may find this document helpful in calling disciples of Jesus to a reflection on our responsibilities for the upcoming elections in our country.

The first reading is taken from the last part of Isaiah called Deutero-Isaiah. In this section are located the “Servant Songs” which tell of the suffering of an innocent for the well being of the community. The servant, though rejected by humans, will be remembered by God. Indeed, the servant speaks on God’s behalf. At first glance it seems like a contradiction, one chosen by God has to endure suffering! The servant is described as one whose ears God has opened and who has not rebelled from what he has heard. This figure was chosen for the benefit of the suffering Israelites in Babylonian exile. They can hear in this servant a description of their own plight. And they have to be asking in their misery--- where is God in all this? To that question, the image of the Suffering Servant must have been reassuring. Just as the servant is not forgotten nor his plight ignored, nor will those in exile be forgotten. Indeed, their suffering and their fidelity to God is noticed by God. God is not far from them.

Peter, recognizes Jesus’ uniqueness and finds it scandalous to imagine that such a chosen One should have to suffer. Peter will have none of it. Unlike the servant in the first reading, Peter is not really listening to what Jesus has to say to him. Peter he has his own agenda in mind for Jesus and the disciples and it certainly doesn’t include suffering or sacrifice. What a mystery this all is! Who can explain the ways of God, that the One called “beloved son” at his baptism (1: 11), the One who has been faithful and has followed God’s will, is about to enter into suffering? It isn’t fair! Why do the good suffer? Notice that in Jesus’ words to those “who wish to come after me,” there is an invitation to share in his lot. He is not speaking of the suffering of sickness over which we have little choice. This is an invitation to follow in his ways, to deny self, “take up your cross and follow me.” In this there is a choice to accept or walk away. Are we willing to make the sacrificial choices that following Jesus and his way involve? Some stories come to mind....

I was riding behind a shiny BMW recently, a sleek model of high-priced engineering. There was a bumper sticker on it that said, “Jesus is my co-pilot.” So what did that tell me? With Jesus as a co-pilot would this driver (and the gorgeous car) never get in an accident? Judging from the sticker this person was obviously a Christian. Was the implied message that if you believe in Jesus you will be successful? If I really believed, would life be prosperous and I too afford such a car? A bumper sticker might proclaim a person’s faith or even give the name of the congregation in which the car owner worships, but it doesn’t quite say it all. It doesn’t come anywhere near saying how the person-of-the-bumper-sticker lives his or her faith; what sacrifices are they willing to make for their beliefs? It takes a lot of faith to believe, as the Servant in the first reading professes, “the Lord God is my help, who will prove me wrong?” When we are

trying to do the right things in Jesus' name, we may get little recognition or popular acclaim. It's even tougher to believe when following God's ways, puts us at odds with those around us. Isn't God supposed to "bless" those who believe with visible signs of approval? It's hard to find proof of that reward and assured success in today's readings.

A twenty seven year old woman recently made a serious life altering decision. Though she had been raised by nominal Catholic parents and rarely went to church while in high school, she says she felt something "tugging at my soul." So, while away at a state university, she started attending Sunday mass at the campus chapel. She was attracted by the dynamic pastoral team she met there, a priest, sister and lay minister. She loved the music, and the preaching she heard touched her, "I felt as if my soul was a parched desert and every time I went to church I found fresh water for my thirst". At first her participation was on again, off again, but little by little, her faith life began to heat up. In her sophomore year she went with the pastoral team and 30 other students on a weekend retreat. That retreat was a turning point and it became the core experience out of which some important future decisions were made.

After her graduation she got a job in a city far from home. First thing she did was to seek out a local church. Soon she became a volunteer religion teacher for the 4th. grade. The more she taught, the more she learned and the deeper became her commitment to faith and the parish community. She had been dating a young man for about a year and though he had many features she admired, she realized his ambitions were contrary to her values and he did not share her belief in Jesus and her commitment to her church community. She decided to end the relationship; she says she wants more in a potential life partner.

She was planning this Sunday's religion class. This gospel was to be the focus of her class. "But it had a very personal meaning for me," she said. "I see this gospel as an expression of my life. I have had to make a very painful decision. I had to deny myself a possible husband and a comfortable life. In some ways, I am 'losing my life' to follow Christ. But I really believe I will gain my life in the long run, not just in the after-life, but in this life as well. I believe my life will be deeper and richer because of the choices I am making. It's just that it is a cross right now, because the decision to end my relationship with N. has been very painful. I feel very lonely and it hurts."

Our life in faith will most likely run counter to the prevailing wisdom. Peter expresses that "wisdom"—no one should have to suffer. For the follower of Jesus, life should be smooth. If Jesus is who he says he is, all his followers should be in for a good time, royal positions and prestige. But Jesus will have none of that. To follow him is to run counter to the prevailing wisdom of our age. Just ask the young woman what the costs are. Ask the couple, married 35 years, who have spent so much energy to make their marriage work. Ask the business person who follows his/her principles even when it costs a quick profit. Ask the doctor who spends extra time to get to know her patients even though it will affect her bottom line. Ask the high school kid who stays friends with an unpopular classmate. Ask the repair person who takes care to really repair that copier, those brakes, or that sink--- and who charges an honest fee for labors.

Jesus summons the crowd—all of us to hear what he has to say. Are our ears open? He does not lay a guilt trip on them or us. He is not threatening us with God's wrath if we don't follow him.... "Follow me, do as I say or you will all be destroyed!" Rather, the invitation is broadcast widely, like the sower of seeds (4: 1-9). Anyone is invited to hear and follow him. "WHOEVER wishes to come after me...." There's the free choice and also a clear statement of what it will cost, "deny self and take up your cross and follow me."

Sounds like the cross will be particular to each person, "his cross, her cross." Each of us is asked to make particular sacrifices, painful choices in our following Jesus. We ask ourselves during this liturgy and afterwards, "In my life, what choices are before me? What or who is my guide as I make these choices?" With election rhetoric heating up in this country, the choices we make for our elected officials may be for people who will protect our own vested interests. That would seem to be the prevailing "wisdom." But maybe, we need a broader perspective. We may even have to choose ways that might not benefit us as much, but will help a group in more need with less political voice than we have. (Cf. the Bishops' statement below.)

I can't help but add this inspirational story I read while on vacation this summer. It's from the NEW YORK TIMES (August 17, 2000). I think it is a story of sacrifice on behalf of those whom Jesus always blessed--- the poor. Salvo Galano was a volunteer in a soup kitchen at the Church of the Holy Apostles in Manhattan. He was also a photographer and would advertize on the bulletin board. He wanted to take pictures of individual homeless people who would come for food at the kitchen. He wanted to make the homeless visible to those of us who have gotten so used to them on our city streets that we no longer really see them. He wanted people to see that the homeless are not so different from anyone else. He didn't want the pictures to be the traditional heart wrenching scenes of the homeless; instead he photographed them more like fashion models against a blank canvas. Thus, their dignity and humanity could speak through the photographs. Though he had gotten some grant money from the Guggenheim Foundation, he spent it all on his project. He became friends with about 15 homeless and he was so taken by his project that he gave up other work assignments. Eventually he went broke, and then he too became homeless. The Times says that he may have cared, "too much about a social issue that has persisted for two decades now, so long that it has lost the power to shock." Salvo Galano gave up all he had to help us see what many of us have stopped seeing. He had to return to Milan and is now living with his father, a retired factory worker. Does the passage apply to Salvo today, "For if you wish to save your life you will lose it, but if you wish to lose your life for my sake and that of the gospel you will save it?"

READER FEEDBACK

My brother Tom Murphy, O.Carm, is active with the high school retreat program Kairos. He has set up a listserve for Kairos leaders to exchange ideas. Since so many high schools now use this retreat program I thought perhaps this would be helpful. Please pass this along to anyone who

might benefit.
Beth Murphy, OP

A person might sign up for kairos-talk by going to the following address, clicking on SUBSCRIBE, and following the relatively easy steps.
<http://www.egroups.com/group/kairos-talk>

If anyone runs into a problem, they can contact me at tmurphy@carmelnet.org and I will get them signed on quickly.

This is the description found at that address:

The Roman Catholic retreat program known as Kairos continues to challenge campus ministers and their staffs. This list provides an opportunity for individuals to pose questions, discuss developments, share resources, and reflect on their school's particular Kairos tradition. Subscriptions are restricted to those adults who work with the Kairos retreat program.

ANOTHER READER'S RESPONSE:

(This one is from Maurine Behrend)

Your mention of Rosa Parks... reminded me of a challenging question from W. Paul Jones, ("The Heresy of Peace," Weavings, XII:6, p. 9) that I used in a Pentecost homily this year.

"I've got a bumper sticker on my car that is a quote from Pope Paul VI "If you want peace, work for justice." To work for justice is to answer the call of the Hebrew prophets, the gospel, the social teachings of our church. It is to work for a world where everyone's basic human needs are met, where the sacredness, the dignity of every human life is respected and honored.

Think about it this way: What if Rosa Parks had decided that she was more interested in peace than in justice that day on the bus in Montgomery, when she was so tired that she sat down and refused to get up when the bus driver told her that black people couldn't sit in those seats? Justice comes first, then peace.

QUOTABLE:

Faithful Citizenship: Civic Responsibility for a New Millennium

(United States Catholic Conference/ National Conference of Catholic Bishops)

Questions for the Campaign

Politics is about more than our own pocketbooks or economic interests. Catholics, other believers, and men and women of good will raise different questions for ourselves and for those who would lead us:

- a. How will we protect the weakest in our midst—innocent, unborn children?
- b. How will we overcome the scandal of a quarter of our preschoolers living in poverty in the richest nation on earth?
- c. How will we address the tragedy of 35,000 children dying every day of the consequences of hunger, debt, and lack of development around the world?

- d. How can our nation help parents raise their children with respect for life, sound moral values, a sense of hope, and an ethic of stewardship and responsibility?
- e. How can society better support families in their moral roles and responsibilities, offering them real choices and financial resources to obtain quality education and decent housing?
- f. How will we address the growing number of families and individuals without affordable and accessible health care? How can health care protect and enhance human life and dignity?
- g. How will our society best combat continuing prejudice, bias, and discrimination, overcome hostility toward immigrants and refugees, and heal the wounds of racism, religious bigotry, and other forms of discrimination?
- h. How will our nation pursue the values of justice and peace in a world where injustice is common, destitution is widespread, and peace is too often overwhelmed by warfare and violence?
- i. What are the responsibilities and limitations of families, voluntary organizations, markets, and government? How can these elements of society work together to overcome poverty, pursue the common good, care for creation, and overcome injustice?
- j. How will our nation resist what Pope John Paul II calls a growing "culture of death"? Why does it seem that our nation is turning to violence to solve some of its most difficult problems—to abortion to deal with difficult pregnancies, to the death penalty to combat crime, to euthanasia and assisted suicide to deal with the burdens of age and illness?

We believe every candidate, policy, and political platform should be measured by how they touch the human person; whether they enhance or diminish human life, dignity, and human rights; and how they advance the common good.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

Our webpage addresses:

<http://www.opsouth.org/preexch.htm>

<http://www.op.org/domcentral/preach/exchange/>

<http://www.Mattdoyle.com/pe/peindex.htm>

“Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by two friars of the Southern Dominican Province experienced in Hispanic Ministry, Carmen Mele, O.P. and Isidore Vicente, O.P. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the

upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. jboll@opsouth.org

"First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com