

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 28TH. SUNDAY (B)

Wisdom 7: 7-11 Psalm 90 Hebrews 4: 12-13 Mark 10: 17-30

By: *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

Have you noticed that if you spend enough time reflecting on one of these gospel passages that they all boil down to the same core message? Though each story is unique in its characters, setting and what Jesus says, nevertheless, you can hear the heart of the gospel in each episode. It's like a good story being told over and over by different people and at different times. I certainly think that is true for today's story of the rich man. Let's look at it more closely to see if this opening thesis holds. At first, the passage seems meant for someone else. How can a story about a rich person apply to us? We are not rich. Let's fax it over to Bill Gates or Donald Trump-- it seems geared to someone like them. Be aware however, that if we do that, we will miss the core gospel message contained in this passage.

The rich man asks Jesus what he must do "to inherit eternal life." After Jesus lists the commandments, the man responds by a quick summary of his life. "Teacher, all of these I have observed from my youth." Jesus doesn't castigate him for false pride, exaggeration or lying, so we presume the man is telling the truth. He really has done all he is supposed to do. It does seem that we have a really good person here. Perhaps if we were asked to write a letter of recommendation for him to Jesus, we would speak well of him and suggest Jesus sign him up as a disciple. Who wouldn't want someone like this in the band of Jesus' followers? Jesus responds appropriately to this good person, "Jesus looked at him, loved him...." Sounds good so far. But then Jesus "lays one on him." This man who seems to have lacked nothing, neither riches or a good life, is lacking one thing.

Let's pause for a moment and look at the religious and cultural background. It may help us get at what is going on in this passage. Riches were considered a reward from God for good behavior. They were looked upon as a concrete sign that the one who owned much must be doing something right in their lives. The riches would be seen as a sign of God's favor, a "blessing." (Don't we do the same when we list all the goods we own and thank God for our "blessings"?) Hence, in the eyes of the observers, we have a good man who observes the commandments and has been rewarded for his good life.

Think about what people thought of the poor—and there was a vast proportion of the people who were desperately poor. In addition, remember that Jesus is talking to disciples who were themselves poor and had left what little they had to follow him. If one were poor, in Jesus' contemporaries' way of thinking, then that person must have done something wrong, or not enough good things in their life to deserve good fortune from God. If they were poor, they were suffering the consequences of being lazy or having broken the commandments, or of being born to sinful parents. This kind of thinking isn't that foreign from how our world judges the rich and the poor today. People are blamed for their poverty, homelessness, unemployment, etc. The crowds who were listening to Jesus were also among the lowest classes of society. Thus, they had little "proof" they were blessed or favored by God since they had no material signs of that favor in this life. Jesus is affirming that the poor could enter life without their establishing their status in the world or their guaranteeing that someday they will do what it takes to earn rewards for leading a good life.

The disciples are dismayed when they hear Jesus say that the rich have no advantage before God. Who can be saved, they wonder, if even the rich, who seem blessed by God, will find it so difficult? Peter speaks for the disciples and reminds Jesus that, "We have given up everything and followed you." In their way of measuring, the disciples had no proof of God's favor and what little they did have, they had given up. They had placed themselves in a vulnerable spot in the eyes of their contemporaries. They had taken a big risk in following Jesus. The only evidence they would have of God's love was Jesus and their faith in him. In that, Jesus reminds them, they would have everything they need in this life. For God, everything is possible, and it has pleased God to offer these disciples the eternal life the rich man asks about--- free of charge. As Jesus says so often, "the last shall be first, and the first last."

Jesus has asked the rich man to give up the very proofs that in his eyes showed he was favored by God. Jesus really did want this man to follow him. He really did want to give this man what he was searching for--- eternal life. In that, Jesus wasn't just offering unending life, but a deeper, more satisfying life than the man had ever known---even with all his riches. If he accepted these new "riches" offered him by Jesus, he might not have the former external proofs of his favor before God, his material riches; but he would know through his faith that he was forgiven, had a new life and was in God's favor. He would also have a new kind of external "riches" as well---a new community of friends, a new family in

Christ—"a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands...."

The invitation Jesus is offering him isn't that the man will receive a fixed place to live, a guaranteed retirement package, multitudes of people admiring and thinking well of him. The rich man is told to first sell what he has and give to the poor. Does his reluctance to do so reveal he is clutching his possessions too tightly and is unwilling to give to those in need? Doesn't he hear that, though he must make some sacrifices, Jesus is going to give him so much more? What Jesus wants to give can't be purchased or earned on our own. It takes flexibility to follow Jesus. He does not spell out the future for us, nor does he guarantee smooth sailing. In fact, he tells his disciples that those who follow him will meet persecutions.

Each of us shall have to take this gospel to heart and not try to palm it off on the next rich person we meet. We need to examine our perspectives and strip away our illusions. What is really important for life we cannot earn or grasp by ourselves. It's not that we aren't at heart, good people, respectable and friendly. It's that God has even more to offer us; so much more that we can let go of other priorities in our lives so that we can receive the gift waiting for us. This eucharist gives us a moment to examine our perspectives and values. We don't have to wait till Lent to ask God to help us strip away our illusions. We have placed too much value on false securities that can pass or be taken away.

The gospel passage opens by saying Jesus was setting out on a journey. He is on his way to Jerusalem to break the powerful grasp evil has over the world. His death would bring unexpected new life to his followers. What he wants to give cannot be purchased or earned. Right now, at this stage of my life, what must I do to be more responsive to the invitation Jesus is extending to me? And rather than presupposing we know the answer to that question, we might pray for a listening heart to the One who is saying, "Come follow me."

By the way, did you catch the core gospel message in this passage? It had to do with our inability to earn the really good life by anything we can do for ourselves; God's taking note of our plight by giving us Jesus and inviting us to trust in him alone for new found riches and life.

READER'S RESPONSE

Following is a quote from an article in the Winter 1997-98 issue of Cross Currents: "Awakening and Grace," Leo D. Leferbure.

Karl Rahner describes a conversation he once had with the noted Japanese Zen Buddhist philosopher, Keiji Nishitani. . . . Nishitani, aware that Rahner had used the term "anonymous Christian" to describe members of other religious traditions who were embraced by the grace of God given in Jesus Christ, asked Rahner what he would say about being called an anonymous Zen Buddhist. Rahner made several points in reply:

"Certainly you may and should do so from your point of view; I feel myself honored by such an interpretation, even if I am obliged to regard you as being in error or if I assume that, correctly understood, to be a genuine Buddhist is identical with being a genuine Christian, in the sense directly and properly intended by such statements. Of course, in terms of objective social awareness it is clear that the Buddhist is not a Christian and the Christian is not a Buddhist."

To this Nishitani responded: "Then on this point we are entirely at one." (This is from Rahner's "The One Christ and the Universality of Salvation.")

----submitted by Jim Dette, Weehawken, NJ

QUOTABLE

[For most homilies] ...the practical problem is not theological, it is that they are boring. It may be ironic, but while today's clergy probably know the Scriptures better than their predecessors, the historical critical method in which they have been trained has drained away much of the excitement, the color and the poetry of the Scriptures in favor of questions about authorship or form criticism. None would deny the importance of these concerns, but they are not what matter to most people.

Biblical understanding, expressed in words that touch both mind and heart, is needed. Yet it alone will not do for, lacking sincerity and a commitment to prayer, it can become self-indulgent and a snare. Poetry and the "music of the mind" are important as well, but they too must serve the Gospel. Jesus' parables, so vivid, concise and subtle, were always told for a purpose. They were persuasive because he not only meant what he said, he lived it.

Someone once asked John Wesley why so many people traveled long distances to hear him preach. "I set myself on fire and the people come to watch me burn," he replied. It is a high order for any would-be homilist—but it beats purgatory.

----Willard F. Jabusch, "Papa Don't Preach" in *Commonweal*, March 28, 2003, page 31.

JUSTICE NOTES

"When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants, and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it...always. "

---Mahatma Gandhi

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:.....

- Michael Brixton #0043529 (On death row since 11/21/97)
- Jimmie Lawrence #0587164 (12/11/97)
- James Gell #0143603 (3/3/98)
- John Williams #0599379 3/5/98)
-

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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