

“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:

My reflections this week are on all three readings. I think they speak to each other, though I wouldn't try "blending" them all into one homily, lest the preaching become too complex.

If we were to make a list of what would make us happy we might include a number of very good and beneficial things---health, good family, material resources, peace of mind, etc. Other factors, voices from outside us, also tell us what makes for happiness--the latter boil down to, "having it all." Perhaps many of us, looking at those who do seem to have it all, have some envy of them. The author of the book of Wisdom, speaking in Solomon's name, is reflecting on mortality. He is, he says, "a mortal, the same as all the rest." In the light of mortality and the human condition, what is truly necessary for us humans? The author has a response---wisdom.

This book was written about 100 years before Christ in Alexandria, Egypt, at a time when the Jewish community thrived both materially and intellectually--not unlike our own culture. The author raises questions about the significance of life and concludes that Wisdom is to be highly prized. Wisdom guides the world in the right directions, in accord with God's design for us. When God offered Solomon anything he wanted, he requested Wisdom: it is prized as the greatest good. Wisdom does not pass away and is worth pursuing above every other desired good.

But this prize is not ours for the earning or the taking. It is graced us by God, only God can give it to us. Our recourse is to do what Solomon did; we pray for it. Wisdom enables us to know how we should act to do God's will, how to be the fulfilled humans God wants us to become. The rich man in today's Gospel (notice he has many possessions and is not described as being "young"--something I missed on my first reading.) lacked this wisdom. A choice was placed before him, and he fails to see the true riches offered him in following Christ. Jesus extols the "little ones" in the Gospels, those who cast their lot with him, those who make the wise choice, the result of God's gift of wisdom.

From now until the end of November, selections from the Epistle to the Hebrews

will be the second reading. The epistle, though complex and filled with symbolism and allusions to Jewish Temple worship, does have some clear themes that are worth a homily or two over the next weeks. It emphasizes the priority of the Son, through whom God spoke, over all creation. He is the faithful high priest who understands our human condition since he shares it with us. His sharing did not stop short of death or pain; rather he stayed with us and journeyed the entire road we must travel so that we might experience a "high priest" who knows our human condition with its pain.

The second readings are not chosen because they have a "common theme" with the other two readings. They are chosen to give us a hearing of the epistolary material in a sequential way through the liturgical cycle. Nevertheless, today's reading might be a good reference in the light of the first, with its emphasis on Wisdom. The Christian places him/herself in the presence of the Word and there, letting God's gift of Wisdom penetrate the receptive mind and heart, receives God's gift of Wisdom. Notice the power the author attributes to the Word; if we put ourselves in a place to receive it, we will be probed by it and our spirits illumined by it. There are many places to hear this "living and effective Word"--a key place is through the Scriptures----indeed in these very readings today!

There is a lot of motion in this part of Mark's Gospel. It has already been established that Jesus is resolutely heading towards Jerusalem where he will suffer. This and next week's Gospel passages, are between the 2nd. and 3rd. predications of the passion. The disciples are reluctant followers (10:32). The scene begins with Jesus "setting out on a journey" and a man running up to him. Jesus knows where he is going, and the man seems to be trying to catch up to him. Throughout this journey Jesus is out in front; he has gone ahead and so can help us through the part of the journey in which we find ourselves. He knows the way. The frenetic feel to the passage adds tension to the moment, the man must make a quick decision. We don't always have the leisure to sit, think and weigh the pros and cons of our decisions, even the important ones. Such choices test the pattern or direction of our lives. If we are rooted in our following of Christ, if he and his way are our path, then we will make a wise choice. If the way of Christ is our wisdom, it will be the source upon which we draw to help us in our daily decisions.

The man opens with a compliment. Jesus' response is brusque. There are many possible reasons for this. In his time, a compliment might be an aggressive suggestion that the one complimented had risen above his/her peers. In Jesus'

culture, when one rises above the others, the rest feel they have lost something. Such a compliment might have come from envy and perhaps the speaker is really wishing the downfall of the one complimented. Jesus deflects the compliment in a customary manner of his time, "No one is good but God alone."

Jesus looks on the man with love and then invites him to "sell what you have and give to the poor." Jesus is inviting the man to follow him and form, with the other disciples, a new kind of security based on a new family/community. That was the deeper risk, first the ties with material goods must be cut, then he is to be a follower. "Following" would mean giving up family, brothers, sisters, mother or father, children or property. The follower would be severed from crucial social ties. Such a sacrifice in the family-oriented world of Jesus would set a person adrift. But a new community is offered the man, a chance to "enter the reign of God." What do followers of Jesus receive upon entrance into this new reign? They receive a new security in their relationship to God and a new treasure in being part of this community of Jesus' followers.

The man has difficulty in giving up his riches. Notice he must not only give them up, but he must give to the poor. This difficulty, the reluctance to give to the poor, is his problem. Riches were seen as a sign of "blessings," a kind of reward for living a good life. Don't we say of what we have that we are "truly blessed"? It's as if material things and our health were proof positive of God's favor on us. Thus, there is a kind of security in having riches, which must, we conclude, mean that we are on God's good side. When the "signs" are not there, do we think we, or those who are without, are out of favor with God? That was the popular belief of Jesus' contemporaries. His invitations speaks to us Americans who want it all now. Jesus is inviting us to give up our signs or "proofs" that we must be blessed by God and focus instead on him. Living in the reign of God as his follower will not mean that we have "made it," but that it has been given us--remember last week's teaching to "accept the reign of God like a little child"?

We know that the question of material things has the potency to split the closest family. How many families split up squabbling over the details of an inheritance? How often do we meet someone new and let their material wealth be the drawing card, ignoring the depth of the person's character? How many children feel their parents' love depends on how well they do at school, or on athletic awards? We say that we would never let possessions get in our way, but the fact is we often evaluate one another by such norms.

Jesus is not saying material wealth is bad: he just says it can blind us to the true riches life holds for us. After all, when are we at our happiest?....when we feel loved for ourselves... when there is peace in our families, in our neighborhoods and in the world. The gospel shines a light on our lives and asks us to take a look around. We must ask ourselves, what is preventing us from living a more meaningful life? Does owning things and keeping them secure take up too much of our daily concerns? What about "practicing" this poverty Jesus calls us to? How much would it pain us to give the things we don't use in our storage areas to the poor? How about our clothes? Extra furniture? Are there any unused appliances around? This isn't all Jesus is saying, but it is a test of how attached we are to "riches" and how much they can get in our way, distracting us from where true wisdom lies. After we give away the surplus of our belongings, who knows, we might have gained in a freedom that allows us to begin to let go of some of what we have always thought we needed to have to make our lives happy. (Additional practical applications may be found in the bishops' election year statement quoted below.)

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Fink, Peter E. THE NEW DICTIONARY OF SACRAMENTAL WORSHIP, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990.

This liturgical dictionary has excellent articles on preaching under such headings as: Homily; Preaching ... as art and craft ... at funerals ... by laypersons ... the lectionary ... the scriptures ... theology of ... special occasion ... Catholic, in the U.S., etc.

QUOTABLE

During this election season we continue quoting from: FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP: CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM (United States Catholic Conference/ National Conference of Catholic Bishops)

Themes of Catholic Social Teaching

The Catholic approach to faithful citizenship begins with moral principles, not party platforms. The directions for our public witness are found in Scripture and Catholic social teaching. Following are key themes at the heart of our Catholic social tradition.

Life and Dignity of the Human Person

Every human person is created in the image and likeness of God. The conviction that human life is sacred and that each person has inherent dignity that must be respected in society lies at the heart of Catholic social teaching. Calls to advance human rights are illusions if the right to life itself is subject to attack. We believe that every human life is sacred from conception to natural death; that people are more important than things; and that the measure of every institution is whether or not it enhances the life and dignity of the human person.

Call to Family, Community, and Participation

The human person is not only sacred but inherently social. The God-given institutions of marriage and the family are central and serve as the foundations for social life. They must be supported and strengthened, not undermined. Beyond the family, every person has a right to participate in the wider society and a corresponding duty to work for the advancement of the common good and the well-being of all, especially the poor and weak.

Rights and Responsibilities

As social beings, our relationships are governed by a web of rights and corresponding duties. Every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things that allow them to live a decent life—faith and family, food and shelter, health care and housing, education and employment. In society as a whole, those who exercise authority have a duty to respect the fundamental human rights of all persons. Likewise, all citizens have a duty to respect human rights and to fulfill their responsibilities to their families, to each other, and to the larger society.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

Scripture teaches that God has a special concern for the poor and vulnerable. The prophets denounced injustice toward the poor as a lack of fidelity to the God of Israel. Jesus, who identified himself with the least of these, came to preach the good news to the poor and told us, "Give to him who asks of you, do not refuse one who would borrow from you." The Church calls on all of us to embrace this preferential love of the poor and vulnerable, to embody it in our lives, and to work to have it shape public policies and priorities.

Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a

way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's act of creation. Work is a way of fulfilling part of our human potential given to us by God. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers, owners, and managers must be respected—the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to organize and join unions, to economic initiative, and to ownership and private property.

Solidarity Because of the interdependence among all the members of the human family around the globe, we have a moral responsibility to commit ourselves to the common good at all levels: in local communities, in our nation, in the community of nations. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they may be. As Pope John Paul II has said, "We are *all* really responsible *for all*."

Care for God's Creation

The world that God created has been entrusted to us, yet our use of it must be directed by God's plan for creation, not simply by our own benefit. Our stewardship of the earth is a kind of participation in God's act of creating and sustaining the world. In our use of creation, we must be guided by our concern for the welfare of others, both around the world and for generations to come, and by a respect for the intrinsic worth and beauty of all God's creatures.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

"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, [Click Here](#).

If you would like to support this ministry, [Click Here](#) to make a secure tax-deductible online donation.

Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",
Jude Siciliano, OP
FrJude@JudeOP.org