

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 29th SUNDAY (B)

Isaiah 53: 10-11 Psalm 33 Hebrews 4: 14-16 Mark 10: 35-45

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

PRENOTE: Welcome to the newest email recipients of “First Impressions,” especially the parishioners of Our Lady of Good Counsel in Pompton Plains, New Jersey.

We have just added two essays to our “Justice Preaching” page. One by Brenda Walsh, OP on President Obama’s address to students on education. The other is by Chuck Dahmn, OP, suggestions for preaching on domestic violence in October. Go to <https://PreacherExchange.com> and click on “Justice Preaching.”

Really! Couldn’t Mark have edited today’s gospel and softened its blatant tones? Can you imagine depicting two of Jesus’ closest disciples, James and John, as brazen and opportunistic? Matthew, who wrote after Mark, also tells today’s gospel story, but dilutes James and John’s raw ambition by having their mother make the same request; thus, deflecting possible scorn away from the sons to their mother. (What a shame, to risk making a stereotype out of a Jewish mother – but that’s for another discussion!)

Mark does nothing to put the disciples in a better light. He has both James and John asking in unison for a favor and Jesus seems prepared to cede to their request, “What do you wish me to do for you?” Then comes the ambitious request from the two disciples, who must have felt they were on the inside track for rewards, power and fame. “Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left.” Were these first followers of Jesus supposed to be our models of faith? Not as Mark portrays them!

Let’s face it, if this were the business world or a conquering army ready to take control of a country or territory and you felt you had an “in” with the chief executive or conquering hero, wouldn’t you be tempted to pull him or her aside and put your request for status and power in early? If you’re going to get ahead in the business or political world such a move, a grab for power, would make perfect sense. You would even be lauded for your initiative and foresight.

But that’s not the way of the reign, the new community, Jesus came to establish.

That's not what he had been teaching his disciples, as they traveled to Jerusalem, about service and giving one's life for others. The disciples miss the point entirely and Mark doesn't shrink from exposing how far off they were from the message Jesus was preaching. The other ten heard what the two had asked and they "became indignant at James and John." Judging from the way Mark has also been describing all the disciples, as dense and spiritually blind, the others were probably "indignant" because James and John beat them to the punch. "First come, first served" – and they weren't first!

You can't blame the disciples for not understanding what Jesus was saying. After all, what leader of a movement for total change can expect followers to stay with him or her by promising suffering, a life of service and obedience – and asking them to choose the last place – as Jesus has been instructing his disciples? No wonder he had so few and no wonder they were practically all gone when he met his death in Jerusalem.

Misunderstanding about what discipleship asks was not limited to just those initial travelers with Jesus. Jesus asks us the same question he asked James and John, "Can you drink the cup that I will drink....?" They respond, "We can..." – but they couldn't. Nor can we, not on our own. Jesus is asking us to be servants and slaves; to be willing to put up with inconvenience and even pain for the sake of his message. Our lives already ask too much of us; why would we want to take on more? Why would we want to participate in Jesus' own suffering?

Notice that Jesus is not asking us to accept just any kind of pain and suffering; nor that pain and suffering are good in themselves. Quite the contrary. It's clear from his healing ministry that he wanted to relieve people of their pain and free them from oppressive forces. Instead, he is inviting his disciples to accept his cross; to drink the cup he drank and be immersed in his baptism. Not the one at the Jordan, but the same baptism of fire he was about to undergo.

Jesus isn't handing out rewards and end-of-the-year bonuses for jobs well done. His disciples aren't on the board of a multi-national corporation. Instead, they are being called to follow Jesus in the servant's way. If they are to be leaders, it will be as servant-leaders, giving their lives for others as Jesus did. Then it will be up to God to determine who gets the rewards and what kind.

Indeed, don't we know people who claim to have begun to receive their rewards

already! A man, with the consent of his family and children, takes his father, who is suffering from Alzheimer's, into their home and they care for him till he dies. This loving gesture calls for sacrifice on the family's part. The pattern of the daily home life shifts enormously. After grandpa dies they all agree that, despite the costs to their individual and family lives, they wouldn't have had it any other way. They feel blessed by the privilege of accompanying their beloved grandfather on his final journey.

There are many other familial stories which require freely-assumed sacrifices. We would say, "Well, that's what families are supposed to do!" But, in Jesus, our "family" has expanded infinitely beyond the blood boundaries. Now we see all humans as our sisters and brothers, and their need calls us to sacrifice; to drink the cup Jesus is offering us. So, why choose to accept Jesus' invitation to follow him? Are we masochists who just love the thought of suffering, being neglected and treated as unimportant, naive believers? Isn't it because we hear God calling us to a richer, more meaningful life? Are we drawn to discover a new life right now, one that might fail other criteria the world uses to measure success – but which gives us a share in God's life already?

In responding to Jesus' call we have come to discover that what the world calls "success," yields little of lasting value. Jesus tells us the path to the life he promises us is paved with many opportunities to serve—or not; to offer our lives or hoard them; to let go of the notion that we are the center of the universe and cast our eyes to those on the borders of life and make them our focus and concern. In other words, to give our lives to whatever form of death our particular discipleship calls us to, so that in dying we might rise to new life. We hear in today's gospel once again the invitation to drink the cup Christ has drunk and be baptized with the fire he was – and then to receive the gift of life God is always offering us.

Mark doesn't soften the flaws of the disciples. Nor does he show Jesus casting them off and trying again to find more suitable candidates to follow him. They will go on to fail and misunderstand him even when he needs them the most. But when he rises from the dead he will forgive them and anoint them with his Spirit, sending them out to call others, as he called them, to be fishers of humans.

The tale of the disciples gives us hope. Who among us has not failed to fully drink the cup Jesus has offered? Who cannot confess to attitudes of competition; the misuse of power; a lack of humility and dependence on God; lukewarm self-denial

for the sake of the Gospel; misdirected focus on possessions in place of people and a hardness of heart to Jesus' words? Whatever our positions in family, Church and community we all, at one time or another, have been as deaf to Jesus' teachings about discipleship as the first disciples Mark tells us about today.

But the same forgiveness offered me them is also given to us. The same spirit of renewed vigor that came upon them is also our gift again today. We hear Jesus' teachings, we admit our failure to live up to them, we are forgiven and, to our surprise, sent out again to be his servants to the world, where we learn again that real prominence in Jesus' kingdom is through service and self-offering.

FAITH BOOK

*Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run.
"Faith Book" is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins
people take home.*

From today's Gospel reading:

Jesus summoned his disciples and said to them...
whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant,
whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all.

Reflection:

Whatever our positions in family, Church and community, at one time or another, we have been as deaf as the disciples were to Jesus' call to serve. We admit our failures to live up to his teachings. To our surprise we are forgiven and, despite our failings, sent out again to be his servants to the world. We learn again that real prominence in Jesus' kingdom is through service and self-offering.

So, we ask ourselves:

- Who has modeled for me what it means to be a servant of the gospel?
- In what ways do I resist my Christian calling to be a servant disciple?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"Confidently approach the throne of grace..."

(Hebrews 4:16)

Those who work in ministries of social justice, and those who, by word and example teach justice, must make prayer the ground of their work and ministries. Prayer opens our hearts to God's compassion and places us at God's disposal to be used for the coming of God's Kingdom. Prayer in which we let go of our own agenda and simply surrender to God's Spirit allows us to see the pain of the world with God's eyes and be filled with the passion of God to better manifest God's

heart of love to all those with whom we work.

Below is a *Prayer for those who Teach Justice*, provided by our Diocesan Office of Peace and Justice. Since we are all called to teach justice by our lives, we invite you to cut it out and pray it regularly.

Prayer for Those who Teach Justice

We give thanks for your light and love, Gracious
God. You have given us a precious mission which
stirs our soul.

We are grateful for your Spirit moving through us,
helping us to form the words of justice, peace,
and love, helping us to proclaim your Good News.

We see the wonderful things you have done for
us, and we cherish the challenge of reaching out,
being your voice of hope to a world of sorrow.

Renew us this day and every day. We quickly grow weary, easily falter, lose heart
and dance with despair.

We need to open ourselves to your grace, to listen with longing for your call, to be
like the Magi,

following a sometimes-distant star.

Remind us *we are part of a community*, we are part of a people on pilgrimage, *we
are never alone.*

We are nourished at your table, and we nourish each other through sharing.

You have called us by name, and we are yours.

Amen.

-Jane Deren

Education for Justice www.educationforjustice.org

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart
Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "*People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.*" If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Cerron T. Hooks #0561692 (On death row since 2/9/00)
- Terry L. Robinson #0349019 (4/10/00)
- Mark L. Squires #0688223 (5/17/00)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

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Thank you.

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