

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 29TH. SUNDAY (B)
Isaiah 53: 10-11 Psalm 33 Hebrews 4: 14-16 Mark 10: 35-45

Dear Preachers:

The first reading has a harsh sounding beginning. (It is bracketed; you have the option to drop it.) "But the Lord was pleased to crush him in infirmity." The text is from one of the "Servant Songs" in Isaiah. The four "songs" extol the just person who remains faithful to God in the face of persecutions. In the other servant songs, the servant spoken of may be Israel, taken into slavery, whose suffering will benefit the world. This song praises the courage of an individual martyr figure who gives up his life for others. The verse, "through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear away," shows that he is not being punished for his sins. Rather, he has voluntarily taken on the guilt of others. He dies to expiate the sins of the guilty, an innocent life is offered and, as a result of his sacrifice, he is also given life and he shall, "see his descendants in a long life." Eventual vindication awaits this faithful servant.

The figure of the suffering servant became a type for Jesus and a way for the early church to interpret Jesus' own suffering and death. Jesus' abandonment by his followers and seeming abandonment by God, was a scandal to the early believers. Seeing Jesus' death through the figure of the "servant" of Isaiah, gave the early church a way to understand that indeed, rather than abandoning Jesus, God had stayed by him through his suffering and death and had raised him up. The preacher has a chance to address the mystery of suffering, and the feelings of abandonment suffering engenders. "Where is God?" "Why has God abandoned me?"--- are familiar laments. Through suffering, life is possible; not only for the afflicted, but for those whose lives are touched by the suffering of a loved one. Suffering is not good in itself, but it does provide the occasion for great expressions of faith and healing of the spirit of those it touches. I feel cautious as I write this and prepare to preach on it, lest in preaching, I sound like I am voicing mere platitudes. "Easy enough for you to talk preacher, you don't know what I am going through!", could be hurled at us this weekend if we are not careful.

Suffering that is accepted in service for others might make a good example here. Such suffering seems to diminish the life of the servant, but in reality, it is a source of life to the one giving it and to those receiving. Know of anyone who has made personal sacrifices and has come alive in the process of giving life to others?

In today's Gospel, we are with Jesus as he is finishing his journey to Jerusalem. During this journey he has been teaching his disciples about discipleship. We are close to his entrance into Jerusalem, and the disciples still don't get the point. They miss the call to service that discipleship entails. Jesus responds that he has not come to give them the ranking they request. The only thing he can offer is the role of service to others and the consequent suffering such service will involve. (You can see why the first reading was chosen, it speaks to this Gospel selection.) The follower of Christ will have to renounce power and drink of the cup of Christ, to be a servant and accept the suffering it entails.

In civil society people will do anything to gain power. These weeks, as we prepare for elections, it shows that politics is a competitive game, and people are continually striving to be victorious and get elected. Those with money get special opportunities to voice their interests to candidates who will eventually speak for their patrons' interests once elected. Power is sought, not to serve the interests of all, nor to serve the most vulnerable, but for the standing and opportunities it provides. Jesus is saying that such seeking of power and positions of influence are not what his disciples must seek. We ask ourselves: are we followers of Jesus or some other leader?

Mark presents the Twelve, and the church they represent, in a negative light. He puts this story in contrast with the one that follows immediately upon this one--the story of the blind Bartimaeus (next Sunday's passage). There's strong irony in the contrast; the disciples who should see who Jesus is, don't; a blind beggar, who can't see, does ---with eyes of faith. Next week, we'll notice that Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem, the place where the Servant of God will suffer. On his heels will be Bartimaeus, who now sees and whom Mark describes as following "Jesus on the way." The "way" is that of discipleship and it leads to Jerusalem. Today's passage shows Jesus trying to open the eyes of his blind disciples; it is going to take a more miraculous event than the physical healing he does for Bartimaeus! The disciples will have to follow him on "the way" to his suffering and death and then experience the eye-opening event of the Resurrection. At this point however, even Jesus' most intimate disciples, James and John, do not get the point. We are totally in God's hands, especially in the suffering that is the consequence of following Christ. At the end, with Jesus, we can trust that God will bring life out of suffering. And we can leave the seating arrangements at the table in the reign of God to God.

The concluding verse defines Jesus' entire mission: he has come to serve. The gift of his life is the source of life for others. He has paid a price, a "ransom" and because of it we are set free. What are we freed from, what has enslaved us? The preacher may want to name the powers that enslave: the images of success, looks, health and power that lure us each day through the media and the norms of our circle of friends. There is also the issue of slavery created by poverty, injustice, ignorance, etc. that plague significant parts of our world. Are we, as disciples, being called to serve, to give our lives to set others free from these forms of slavery?

The two disciples are asking for a part of Christ and his reign. I can't resist a quote by Wilbur Rees: "I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please, not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of [God] to make me love a black man or pick beets with a migrant. I want ecstasy, not transformation: I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please."

QUOTABLE

When we are really honest with ourselves we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of [people] we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage is to sacrifice ourselves for others in totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be [human] is to suffer for others. God help us!

---Cesar Chavez, quoted in CELEBRATION: AN ECUMENICAL WORSHIP SERVICE, October 2000, page 441.

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)

Moral Priorities for Public Life

We wish to suggest some issues which we believe are important in the national debate during 2000 and beyond. These are not the concerns of Catholics alone; in every case we are joined with others in advocating these concerns. These brief

summaries are not intended to indicate in any depth the details of the positions we have taken in past statements on these matters. For a fuller discussion of our positions on these and related issues, we refer the reader to the documents listed at the end of our statement.

Protecting Human Life

Human life is a gift from God, sacred and inviolable. This is the teaching that calls us to protect and respect every human life from conception until natural death. Because every human person is created in the image and likeness of God, we have a duty to defend human life in all its stages and in every condition. Our world does not lack for threats to human life. We watch with horror the deadly violence of war, genocide and massive starvation in other lands, and children dying from lack of adequate health care. Yet as we wrote in our 1998 statement, *Living the Gospel of Life*, "Abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human life and dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental good and the condition for all others."¹⁶ **Abortion**, the deliberate killing of a human being before birth, is never morally acceptable. The purposeful taking of human life by **assisted suicide** and **euthanasia** is never an act of mercy, but is an unjustifiable assault on human life. In assessing our obligation to protect human life, *"We must begin with a commitment never to intentionally kill, or collude in the killing, of any innocent human life, no matter how broken, unformed, disabled or desperate that life may seem."*

We urge Catholics and others to promote laws and social policies that protect human life and promote human dignity to the maximum degree possible. Laws that legitimize abortion, assisted suicide, and euthanasia are profoundly unjust and wrong. We support constitutional protection for unborn human life, as well as legislative efforts to oppose abortion and euthanasia. We encourage the passage of laws and programs that promote childbirth and adoption over abortion and assist pregnant women and children. We support aid to those who are sick and dying by encouraging effective palliative care. We call on government and medical researchers to base their decisions regarding biotechnology and human experimentation on respect for the inherent dignity and inviolability of human life from its very beginning.

The Church has always sought to have conflicts resolved by peaceful means between and among nations. Church teaching calls on us to avoid and to limit the effects of **war** in many different ways. Thus, direct and intentional attacks on

civilians in war are never morally acceptable, nor is the use of weapons of mass destruction or other weapons that cannot distinguish between civilians and soldiers.

War, genocide, and starvation threaten the lives of millions throughout the world. We support programs and policies that promote **peace** and **sustainable development** for the world's poor. We urge our nation to join the treaty to ban anti-personnel landmines and to promptly ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty as a step toward much deeper cuts in and the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons. We further urge our nation to take more serious steps to reduce its own disproportionate role in the scandalous **global trade in arms**, which contributes to violent conflicts around the world.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,
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