

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 31<sup>ST</sup>. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)  
Deuteronomy 6: 2-6 Psalm 18 Hebrews 7: 23-28 Mark 12: 28b-34  
By *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

Since early October the second reading has been from the letter to the Hebrews. And I have not preached from it. I tend to go too quickly to the Gospel, sometimes to the first reading and not very often to the second. The letters offer some extra difficulties for the preacher and, since they lack the narrative qualities of the other two readings, they tend to get overlooked. Ask yourself, when was the last time you preached or heard a preaching from the second reading? It would be a shame to ignore the letter to the Hebrews and not attempt at least one preaching from it these weeks.

The initial sound of the Hebrews selections doesn't exactly open the door too quickly to invite us in for a look around. The letter sounds obscure, antiquated and “high-churchy” with its references to sanctuary, temple, high priesthood, blood sacrifices and a God that sounds too “on high” and distant from our lives. Jesus himself sounds aloof in today's selection from Hebrews; he is described as “high priest,” “separate from sinners,” and “higher than the heavens.” Hard to hear this exalted language, especially with Advent on the not-too-distant horizon, with its God-coming-among-us message. In general, I find that preaching from the letters often requires extra background work in order to understand, what on first approach, seems highly theological and abstract. So, we need to approach this letter by first looking at some background. Bear with me.

Reginald Fuller says that the letter is addressed to Christians in Italy who have stagnated in their faith. It sounds less like a letter and more like a sermon, for it lacks the epistolary style of the other letters. It appears to be a “series of pep talks” addressed to a church that is like the ancient Israelites, a people who are wandering through the desert. Like the Israelites, they have been freed from slavery but have not yet entered the Promised Land. That generation of desert wanderers, along with Moses, had failed to enter the Land because they lacked faith. For Christians, Christ has delivered us; but we still await the complete freedom we will have when he returns. This epistle will exhort its early readers and us not to lose faith on the way, lest we too fail to enter God's promise.

Hebrews is addressed to stagnated Christians who have grown bored with the

routine of their faith. I wonder if this doesn't describe a lot of us church goers and the routine we can get into. Faith can become merely a matter of fulfilling customs but lacking the fire that gives vitality and direction to daily life. We can expect the church to be there for us when we need it for key transitional moments like births, deaths and marriages, but otherwise life is little affected by what we profess each week at this Eucharist.

When Christians first gathered, they celebrated a faith in the risen Jesus that gave an entirely new direction to their lives. Their worship gave them a chance to celebrate their new life; to share the Word that illumined their faith, to break a bread that would strengthen the days ahead and keep the memory of Jesus alive for them. Each time we assemble, as we do today, we share the same life the first Christians knew in their gatherings, we celebrate common rites of passage, everyday joys and struggles, our responsibility for each other and our common holy days. If this is not what we feel when we gather, then the letter to the Hebrews is addressed to us, as it was to those for whom worship had become a routine.

Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is at the center our lives. While we may be stagnated in our faith, his sacrifice on the cross is a constant source of new life for us—a way of invigorating us again and again. What had to be done for us, we are told, was done by Jesus. We don't need to go elsewhere to find a guru or new method or religious tradition to quicken our spirits and satisfy our thirst for meaning to our days. The author of Hebrews wants us to look again at who we are, what our needs are and how Christ, who shared our human state, can now raise us up to a renewal of our faith. He is our “high priest” whose sacrifice has and always will bring us life.

The message about Christ's priesthood is introduced early (2:17) and dominates the section from which today's reading is taken (4:14-10:31). According to Hebrews, Jesus has two “priestly qualifications”: he has been faithful in serving God and has “been tested as we are”( 4:15) and therefore, he can sympathize with our struggle. So, rather than present an other-worldly Christ for our worship and admiration, Hebrews affirms early that He was very much of this world. He knows from his own experience what we are up against in life. In his humanity, Jesus showed us what is possible for us, he opened our eyes to the dignity and fullness we humans can have. His life death and resurrection enable for us a new way of living we could not achieve on our own but is now offered to us through faith in

Christ. In Hebrews, Jesus is shown in solidarity with humans, he was “tested” through what he suffered, “beset by weakness “ (5:2). Sometimes we need to be reminded that Christ is not above us but readily shared our lot. At these times we turn to him, as we do today, as a sign of what is possible for us. We are reminded that, despite present difficulties and frustrations, through him we are “saved,” we are able to endure our present trials and one day we will together enter “God’s rest.”

The other aspect placed before us in Hebrews is shown in today’s reading. Jesus is now above the fray. While he knows our human limitations, he is no longer subject to them. But he is available to us to help us overcome what we are not able to do on our own. He has passed through the trials and is ready to help us do the same. Unlike the Levitical priests, whose priesthood lasted only as long as they lived, Jesus’ priesthood is eternal, and his sacrifice “once for all.” Hebrews sees Christ as called and found acceptable to God and able to accomplish the task of being mediator for us. As our high priest he has passed beyond the grip of death and is “holy innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, higher than the heavens.”

We have limitations and are sinful, but because of Jesus and his sacrifice, permanent relationship with God is available to us. No need to shrink from God. No one need feel he or she is inadequate or too much a sinner to pray to God. Sometimes people express a sense of unworthiness, asking that a minister, priest or sister do the praying for them. Asking others to be a part of our community of prayer is one thing; not feeling worthy to pray for ourselves is quite another. If we need assurance of God’s disposition towards us we have as proof God’s sign of compassion, Jesus our high priest.

The letter, with its priestly and temple imagery puts the reader into a “temple mentality.” If priests offer sacrifice in temples and if, by our baptism, we share in the priesthood of Jesus (“priestly people”), then we can see our lives in priestly terms. Now--we are already in the presence of God, offering gifts. Now---we are in the temple and all that we do is done as offering to God, the totality of our lives in this faithful community is a sacrifice to God. Now--- God dwells here with us, and where God is, so is the temple for worship. We too have roles similar to that of Jesus—our lives of sacrifice, our daily attempts to be faithful to our roles, are pleasing in God’s sight. These lives are public worship, visible signs to others that we look upon our world and our work in it in reverential ways.

When we serve “the least,” seeing Jesus in them, we are doing worship in a public temple. When we give of our time and suffer the inconvenience of interrupted schedules, we are making public sacrifice at the altar. When we remain trusting, despite sickness or limitations of old age, we are proclaiming the Gospel from a worldly pulpit. When we resist daily temptations and dishonest shortcuts at work, we are making present to all around us the holiness of our one “high priest”—“holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, higher than the heavens,” who is “always able to save those who approach God through him....” (For further suggestions on how we offer public worship of our God and are united in the one sacrifice of our high priest Christ, see the bishops’ suggestions in the Quotable section below.)

## QUOTABLE

This concludes our election year quotes from: FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP: CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM (United States Catholic Conference/ National Conference of Catholic Bishops) Commenting on this document, Joseph Califano, Jr., former secretary of health, education and welfare said: “The tone and specificity of the positions set forth in this [document] will confound the secular liberal media, which routinely equate Catholic doctrine with the positions of Jerry Falwells, Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition and the religious right. The bishops will also raise the hackles of those who see little room for any religion —especially the Catholic Church—in matters of public policy. For Catholics who take seriously the ‘call to active and informed citizenship, bringing their commitment to human life and dignity and concern for the poor and vulnerable to public life,’ this document raised the question, ‘For whom should I vote?’”

(AMERICA: THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY, September 9, 2000, page 8-9)

—from, FAITHFUL CITIZENSHIP: CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM

Pursuing Social Justice

In accordance with God's plan for human society, we are called to commit ourselves to protect and promote the life and dignity of the human person and the common good of society as a whole. We must always remember God's special concern for the poor and vulnerable and make their needs our first priority in

public life. We are concerned about a wide range of social issues, including economic prosperity and justice, welfare reform, health care, housing, agricultural policy, education, and discrimination.

Church teaching on **economic justice** insists that economic decisions and institutions be judged on whether they protect or undermine the dignity of the human person. We support policies that create jobs with adequate pay and decent working conditions, increase the minimum wage so it becomes a living wage, and overcome barriers to equal pay and employment for women and minorities. We reaffirm the Church's traditional teaching in support of the right of all **workers** to choose to organize and bargain collectively and to exercise these rights without reprisal. We also affirm church teaching on the importance of economic freedom, initiative, and the right to private property, which provide tools and resources to pursue the common good.

Efforts to provide for the basic financial needs of poor families and children must enhance their lives and dignity. The goal should be reducing **poverty** and dependency, not simply cutting resources and programs. We seek approaches that promote greater responsibility and offer concrete steps to help families leave poverty behind. Recent attempts to reform the welfare system have focused on providing productive work and training, mostly in low-wage jobs. Until new workers find jobs that pay a **living wage**, they will need other forms of support including tax credits, health care, child care, and safe, affordable housing.

We are also concerned about the income security of low- and average-wage workers and their families, when they retire, become disabled, or die. In many cases, women are particularly disadvantaged. Any proposal to change **Social Security** must provide a decent and reliable income for these workers and those who depend on them.

Affordable and accessible **health care** is an essential safeguard of human life and a fundamental human right. Any plan to reform the nation's health care system must be rooted in values that respect human dignity, protect human life, and meet the unique needs of the poor. We support health care that is affordable and accessible to all. As part of our efforts to achieve fundamental health care reform, we will support measures to strengthen Medicare and Medicaid and work for incremental measures that extend health care coverage to children, pregnant women, workers, immigrants, and other vulnerable populations. Additionally, we support policies

that provide effective, compassionate care for those suffering from HIV/AIDS and those coping with addictions.

The lack of safe, affordable **housing** is a national crisis. We support a recommitment to the national pledge of "safe and affordable housing" for all and effective policies that will increase the supply of quality housing and preserve, maintain, and improve existing housing. We promote public/private partnerships, especially those that involve religious communities. We continue to oppose all forms of discrimination in housing and support measures such as the Community Reinvestment Act to help ensure that financial institutions meet the credit needs of the local communities in which they are located.

The first priority for **agriculture** policy should be food security for all. Food is not like any other commodity: it is necessary for life itself. Our support for Food Stamps, the Women, Infant and Children program (WIC), and other programs that directly benefit poor and low-income people is based on our belief that no one should face **hunger** in a land of plenty. Those who grow our food should be able to make a decent living and maintain their way of life. **Farmers** deserve a decent return for their labor. Our priority concern for the poor calls us to advocate especially for the needs of **farm workers** whose pay is often inadequate and whose housing and working conditions are often deplorable. Many farm workers are undocumented and are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. We also urge that public policies support the practice of sustainable agriculture and careful stewardship of the earth and its natural resources.

Care for the earth and for the **environment** is a "moral challenge" in the words of Pope John Paul II. We support policies that protect the land, water, and the air we share, and encourage environmental protection, sustainable development, and greater justice in sharing the burdens of environmental neglect and recovery.

The gospel mandate to love our neighbor and welcome the stranger leads the Church to care for **immigrants**, both documented and undocumented. We seek basic protections for immigrants, including due process rights, access to basic public benefits, and fair naturalization and legalization opportunities. We oppose efforts to stem migration that do not effectively address its root causes and permit the continuation of the political, social, and economic inequities that cause it.

All persons, by virtue of their dignity as human persons, have an inalienable right

to receive a quality **education**. We must ensure that our nation's young people, especially the poor and most vulnerable, are properly prepared to be good citizens, to lead productive lives, and to be socially and morally responsible in the complicated and technologically advanced world of the twenty-first century. This requires an orderly, just, respectful, and non-violent environment where adequate professional and material resources are available. We support initiatives that provide adequate funding to educate all children no matter what school they attend or what their personal condition. We also support providing salaries and benefits to all teachers and administrators that reflect the principles of economic justice, as well as providing the resources necessary for teachers to be academically and personally prepared for the critical tasks they face. As a matter of justice, we believe that when services aimed at improving the educational environment—especially for those most at risk—are available to students and teachers in public schools, these services should be available to students and teachers in **private and religious schools** as well.

Our schools and our society in general must address the growing "culture of violence." Concern about **violence** leads us to promote a greater sense of moral responsibility, to advocate a reduction in violence in the media, to support gun safety measures and reasonable restrictions on access to assault weapons and hand guns, and to oppose the death penalty.

Our society must also combat **discrimination** based on sex, race, ethnicity, or age. Such discrimination constitutes a grave injustice and an affront to human dignity. It must be aggressively resisted. Where the effects of past discrimination persist, society has the obligation to take positive steps to overcome the legacy of injustice. We support judiciously administered affirmative action programs as tools to overcome discrimination and its continuing effects.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you. - "Blessings on your preaching", Jude Siciliano, OP - [FrJude@JudeOP.org](mailto:FrJude@JudeOP.org)