

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 3RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)
JANUARY 23, 2000
Jonah 3: 1-5, 10 Psalm 25 I Cor 7: 29-31 Mark 1: 14-20

Dear Preachers:

These past Sundays are emphasizing the notion of call or vocation. The first reading doesn't tell all of Jonah's story, for at first he resisted the call to go and preach in Nineveh. When he finally obeys God and goes to proclaim God's Word to the Ninevites, they hear and repent. The Gospel is about another kind of response to an invitation; this time the call comes from Christ and those invited follow immediately.

Let's focus on the Gospel today. One commentator points out that the seeming casual phrase, "he made his way," is not as casual sounding in its original language. It means in Greek, "as he passed by," and suggests an epiphany. It suggests the glory of God is being manifested to the fishers, somehow, they see beneath the surface, or something inside of them is touched by this encounter with Jesus. The preacher might want to work with their response, "they immediately abandoned their nets." Later in the story, the point is made that those who respond leave family and the company of other fishers behind. Following Jesus may require sacrifices of many kinds, leaving behind family, economic conditions and one's compatriots. Most of our resolutions to change take some time to accomplish, yet these followers go immediately. Why? Had they been searchers, dissatisfied with their lives? Had their religious practice proved empty for them? What hunger was touched in them and what hunger is touched in us as we hear this over-familiar call to follow Jesus? The preacher needs to be faithful to the spirit of this text. Mark really is saying they left "immediately." He is making his point about discipleship. Our tendency is to try to explain their immediate response away, we want a more "practical" response. We can't imagine such spontaneity or total dedication. But the point seems to be how quickly and trustingly they responded.

We are getting much talk and literature these days from people who want to be president of our country. Daily we hear speeches or excerpts in which hopeful candidates lay out their plans for the future of the country under their administration. People are paying as much as \$1,000 a plate to attend dinners with the candidates. Next January, the newly elected president will make an inaugural speech in which he will lay out goals for the country under his administration. On

taking public office, we hear what a politician intends to do, we remember promises made during campaigns and we will look to see how and if they are fulfilled.

Jesus' first words are his inaugural speech, they reveal what he plans to do and how. His words are brief, but they reveal much. For generations prophets had been promising the arrival of "the time." It would be a time when God would rescue the people, visit them and draw them out of the entangled nets of their lives, out of the predicaments their sins had gotten them into. The time had finally come and Jesus tells us in his inauguration speech that God is reaching out to heal us and that Jesus is the concrete sign of where God's heart lies--it lies with us.

The invitation is coming our way again. These are very familiar words of Jesus, so familiar they may have lost their impact, even sound trite. In the beginning of the new year, stores take inventory and plan ahead for another business season. Jesus makes an offer to us to do the same--- take stock and re-order our lives. Being a Christian involves this frequent self-evaluation. We are "followers." We are not like students who have finished a course of studies and now have our degree in hand, "That's that, I've finished the course! What's next?" Jesus is making "his way" along the Sea of Galilee. He is on the move and invites people to follow him. We need to reflect on the quality of our response to his invitation.

We cannot become stagnated in our following of Jesus; we cannot settle into a comfortable place where our faith feels like an arm chair experience. Jesus' is a mobile classroom of discipleship. We follow him and he has a purpose, but it isn't all laid out for us to see at this moment. Rather, we are invited to join him on "the Way." This Way will be part of our changing lives; will be applicable to us at each stage our lives; will be with us in various manifestations to address us as our lives require. It is a Way and so does not pass at the end of a fixed period of time. It is not another passing moment or disposable item to be thrown out, as our society discards so many passing interests, trends or gadgets. It means a lifelong commitment to One who would be our teacher. Following him will require a serious, daily decision to practice what he has taught us,----IS teaching us.

An article in the newspaper tells of gimmicks aspiring college applicants are using to get the attention and favorable decisions of college admissions personnel. Entrance boards report receiving videos of the applicants, boxes of candy, flowers, etc. One even received an engraved request that looked like a formal invitation to

an important event. How do Jesus' followers get picked? He chose them based on his own standards. They were Galileans, from a land populated and influenced by pagan Gentiles. Hardly "churchy" types. The only formal education they had was that they were fishers--if any virtues disposed them to being disciples, it may have been the virtues required of people who fish---- persistence? hope? And, of course, patience.

Our world esteems us if we are well educated, have attained rank and are self-sufficient. These disciples were willing to follow, i.e. they were willing to acknowledge their inadequacy, and they were willing to be taught. Of course, they aren't called just for themselves. They will have a purpose; they will learn from Jesus how to catch others for the project he calls "the reign of God." We may not know how to do it on our own, but he does expect us to reach out to others, and he will teach us how. To accept this reign means we switch our loyalties from other powers and attractions to God. God's domain and rule form our primary citizenship, we will do nothing contrary to God's dominion over us, not for self-aggrandizement, not for country, not even for Church when anything is contrary to God's rule of love and justice.

ONE GOOD PUBLICATION FOR THE PREACHER:
SPIRITUALITY AND HEALTH: THE SOUL/BODY CONNECTION
I found this at the American Airlines lounge and read it during a four hour flight delay. I wasn't sure what I had picked up, but I was very pleasantly surprised. This quarterly magazine has notable writers and editors in the area of spirituality. It features articles on contemporary and traditional spirituality for the modern and busy person. Its spiritual focus includes: poetry (Kathleen Norris is the poetry editor), art, spiritual practices, book reviews, quotes and movie reviews (based on their spiritual messages). I also liked its social and ecological awareness. Preachers will find it helpful for its ample illustrations about the pursuit of spirituality in the busy lives of our congregations.
(There is an introductory year's subscription for \$14.95—which I decided to try.)
74 Trinity Place, New York City 10006. Tel. 1-800-876-8202

QUOTABLE:

Some bright spots this year:

- Infant mortality is currently at its lowest in the nations' history.
- High School drop-out rates are as well.
- Life expectancy has increased by five years since the 1970s.
- Poverty among the elderly has fallen more than 50% since the 1970s.

But at the same time many indicators of social health have worsened significantly

- Income inequality is at its third worst level in 50 years.
- Approximately one in five children in America today lives in poverty, a 33% increase since 1970.
- Average wages for American workers have fallen sharply since the early 1970s, despite the strong economy.
- More than 41 million Americans are without health insurance, the worst performance since records have been kept.
- Suicide rates among the young are 36% higher than they were in 1970 and nearly triple the rate in 1950.
- Violent crime remains almost double what it was in 1970, even with substantial improvement during the 1990s
- Child abuse has increased dramatically; an estimated 3.1 million children were reported abused in 1996 alone.

—from “The Index of Social Health,” published in the Fordham Institute of Innovation in Social Policy,” quoted in, SPIRITUALITY AND HEALTH: THE SOUL/BODY CONNECTION, Vol. 2, #4, page 7.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

FrJude@JudeOP.org