

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 5<sup>th</sup>. Sunday ORDINARY TIME (B)

FEBRUARY 9, 2003

Job 7: 1-4;6-7 Psalm 147 I Cor. 9: 16-19; 22-23 Mark 1: 29-39

Dear Preachers:

The selection from Job certainly contradicts the familiar expression, “as patient as Job,” that we use to describe someone of long suffering. Turns out, Job is not patient at all. The popular wisdom of the time would have attributed suffering to punishment for wrongs done, however, he feels he has done nothing wrong to deserve such misery. He is not meekly accepting his lot in life, he is vocal, even eloquent, in his protest. His prayer lament loosens our tongues to respond to life’s problems in a similar way, if we feel life has become too burdensome even to pray. Some people don’t think this is a “proper way to speak to God.” They feel God is either the source of their misery or that, though they have led good lives and deserve better, God is standing by doing nothing while they are going through distress. Rather than enter into a “shouting match” with God, they keep silent. But this kind of respectful silence harbors resentment and can create a chill in our relationship with God. There is plenty of witness in the Hebrew texts, especially in the psalms, to encourage a more honest expression of our feelings. A complaint to God puts aside false pieties, formalism and “proper etiquette” to express honest feelings to the One who has the power to change things but seems uninterested or even impotent.

There certainly are times in our lives when life seems out of control, as if someone with an evil intent is running the show. We ask, “Who’s in charge here?” The evils or hardships we experience can’t possibly be coming from the One who created us, we reason. Job expresses this feeling of being under a harsh sentence when he says he feels like a “hireling,” someone working for a hard taskmaster. His days are a “drudgery,” he is, he says, a slave working in the hot sun who “longs for the shade.” What is troubling is that Job is not being punished for any wrong he has committed. If he were, we would feel less fragile as we read this, we would feel less susceptible to a similar fate. If this misery he so eloquently describes, could happen to an innocent person, who would be exempt from something similar? Hearing Job may cause us to feel we are walking on thin ice and at any moment we might break through and be overwhelmed by the killing waters beneath.

Even living a good life doesn't seem to spare us from what looks like the perfidy of the gods. When hear this Job reading we are tempted to put our hands over our ears and shout at the top of our lungs, as we did when we were kids and didn't want to hear something. Of course, now we behave in a more adult fashion when the unpleasant enters. We change the subject if the conversation is about the divorce of close friends, or a serious sickness that strikes down someone our age. We avoid thinking about the future dire consequences of our present actions. We change the channel when the faces of starving innocent children or weeping victims of war appear. Let's not get morose, let's talk about youth and physical beauty, the athletic and the latest technologies. But it is hard to get Job's words out of our heads as we hear them at this liturgy. For anyone of us might speak them someday, no matter how prosperous or successful our lives----or good. "I have been assigned months of misery," sound like words from a hospital ward. Is it the cancer patient or the grieving spouse who might say, "troubled nights have been told off for me?"

I look for the grace in this passage; it ends so dismally! ---"I shall not see happiness again." Perhaps the somber word of Job, who once prospered, but is now in dire straits, is a wakeup call to encourage me to stay fixed to God, not to trust in aspects of life that can be taken away overnight. Perhaps too I might learn from Job that when life takes a hard turn I can express myself without inhibition to God and know that God will not strike me dead! One word of Job's does stir up hope. He addresses God and says, "REMEMBER that my life is like the wind...." It is spoken by a person who realizes that he is not the source of his own being, that he is totally dependent on the One who created him. He is telling the Creator, "Remember what you made when you made me, I am vulnerable, impermanent and can blow away and disappear as easily as the wind. Remember I am nothing, insubstantial and need you for my very existence." It is a word of faith, a word to remind God of the bond God has with the people. Job is saying, "You know how I am, so do something about it!" He is challenging God to remember humans are mere wind. But the word for wind used here is "Ruah" and it has another possible reference. Ruah also refers to the life force that comes from God. Job may be reminding God how ephemeral his life is (Ruah); but at the same time admitting that God is the source of the life breath (Ruah) in him. So, God can bring back life to this frail human and sustain it. Has God forgotten? Of course, not and by "reminding" God, Job is actually reminding himself; God remembers what God made and knows it cannot live unless God keeps renewing life in the creature, especially when misery had made that life burdensome.

There are four episodes in today's gospel story. With last week's passage, they form a "day in the life of Christ." A lot happens on this day. Jesus is very busy--- God is very busy. And it is a sabbath, a day when humans rest, but God keeps extending gracious kindness to the needy creatures God has made. The scene takes place in Capernaum; we are not in Jerusalem. Because there was only one place for sacrificial worship, the temple in Jerusalem, most of the people were denied regular access to such worship. Instead, they attended synagogues, which were places in the towns for instruction and prayer.

Jesus has just left the synagogue where he has driven an unclean spirit from a man and enters the house of Simon and Andrew. One of the criticisms of homilies is that they contain too many ideas. A passage that contains four episodes might result in a preaching that suffers from excess. So, to help focus the preaching, I have decided to preach from the first episode in today's narrative, the cure of Peter's mother-in-law.

Notice how succinctly Mark tells the story: Jesus was told about the woman's condition, he went over to her, "grasped her hand and helped her up and the fever left her. She immediately began to wait on them." Mark uses rich New Testament expressions to describe the cure, though they sound ordinary on first hearing. Jesus "helped her up" —this is the same expression in the New Testament that is often used in the resurrection stories. Mark is implying that this person is being given a new life, a life that only the risen Jesus can give.

What does this new life look like? Well, we are told when she was healed, the woman "began to wait on them." It sounds like she is doing household chores, "woman's work," but the word Mark uses is "diakoneo," the word for "church work," or Christian ministry. Thus, Mark is implying that she "waits" on the community and does the work of the community. When people experience new life from Jesus, they are willing and able to serve others. What one receives one wants to share. The mother-in-law is quick in her response, her "work" isn't taken on grudgingly. The best ministers among us do their work with a sense of joy that seems to come from their own experience of Jesus "raising them up." In fact, believers who do "diaconal" work say they get more out of what they do than they put into it. It is as if, in the midst of their ministry to others, Jesus is taking them by their hand and "raising them up."

There is no easy answer to Job's problems. He is the innocent sufferer. There is no "solution" to the mystery of suffering. But we do hear today's gospel showing Jesus' power over suffering. We know that unlike the fictitious and innocent Job, Jesus is very real, the sinless one who takes on our suffering; who suffers so others can be set free. This is the truth to be engaged and celebrated in our liturgy today. What Jesus did for Simon's mother-in-law he does for us, individually and as a community. He extends a hand to us, raising us up from sin and death to a new life. His new life gives us the power to see the needs of others and respond with energy and joy.

### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Gerris Immink and Ciska Stard (eds.), *PREACHING: CREATING PERSPECTIVE*. Utrecht, Netherlands: Societal Homiletica, 2002. ISBN 90-806342-6-3. Paper, 238 pages.

These are sermons, lectures, reports of workshops and other contributions of the 2001 conference of the Societas Homiletica, an international group of scholars in homiletics. A book for the serious homiletical student, it focuses on how it is possible for preaching to create perspective in specific cultural settings.

### QUOTABLE

Preaching is not dead in the United States, but it does need tender loving care. It needs preachers who understand that writing sermons is an important, challenging task that cannot be left until the last minute. It needs congregations that give preacher's time to write excellent sermons. It needs seminaries that hire people trained to teach preaching, not just "good preachers who are ready to retire." It needs denominational leadership that understands that learning to preach is a lifelong enterprise. It needs bishops and churches who will provide preachers with time and money to keep on learning.

Ever since Mary Magdalen greeted the dejected followers of Jesus with the joyous news that she had seen the risen Lord, preaching has continued to be an important part of God's mission. Our preaching lifts up those who have fallen, comforts those who mourn, points the way to God's path and confronts those who have wandered off the path.

We have been entrusted with a monumental and humbling task. May we, with the Grace of God, become weavers of God's grand and glorious future.

---Lucy Blind Hogan, PREACHING: CREATING PERSPECTIVE, Page 70

## JUSTICE NOTES

In light of the statement by U.S. Catholic Bishops (June 15, 2001) on global warming and their call to "exercise stewardship" in our use of natural resources, during these next weeks I will be sharing with you recommendations for how we can help the environment. Some are simple, some will require a long-term commitment. (I found these on the bulletin board of a retreat house; sorry, I do not know the original source.) We preachers need to recall the goodness of creation for our hearers and challenge them, and ourselves, to tend to what God has placed in our hands.

- Do not litter.
- Oppose toxic chemicals on fruits and vegetables.
- Monitor workers' exposure to hazardous products and conditions (consult local trade unions).
- Participate in clean-air and clean-water programs.
- Learn how to lobby local, state, and federal officials.
- Suggest and help organize an environmental awareness day at your parish.
- Volunteer with an environmental group.
- Join a local or national pro-life group to stand up for unborn human life.
- Air dry laundry whenever possible.
- Collect rainwater and graywater (i.e., tub, sink, wash water) for use in gardening.

## POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, I    Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- John W. Jones                      #0216650    (on the Row since 8/16/1990)
- John Daniels                      # 0216650    (9/25/90)
- Steven V. Mc Hone                #0270047    (3/7/91)
- Elias H. Syriani                    #03980022    (6/13/91)

----Central Prison    1300 Western Blvd.    Raleigh, NC    27606

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

*Jude Siciliano, OP*

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