

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 6TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)
FEBRUARY 16, 2003

Leviticus 13: 1-2, 44-46 Psalm 32 I Corinthians 10: 31-11:1 Mark 1: 40-45

Dear Preachers:

Things feel like they are getting out of hand for Jesus because of his curing the leper. At first glance it looks like a very good thing; a leper is cured. And of course it is.

In our age there are diseases that grip the heart with fear and dread—Alzheimer, AIDS and cancer come immediately to mind. There are some cures and treatments of course--- for those who can afford them, catch the disease early enough and can follow up with necessary medicines and therapies. Early in our national AIDS crisis people shunned those with the disease. There were physical revulsion, blame and social exclusion. We still tend to cast blame on those with some forms of cancer: they shouldn't have smoked so much; should have avoided all that preservative-laden junk food; shouldn't have put off the doctor visits for so long, etc. Even in our modern nations, those with serious sickness experience isolation. Are we afraid to be with the very sick because being with them reminds us of our own vulnerability and mortality? Out of sight--- out of mind. One can still hear people blame themselves for serious illness; implying they must have done something wrong to deserve such “punishment from God.” We continue to link goodness and holiness with health; fault and sin with sickness.

They certainly did that in Jesus' time. If you were sick, you must have sinned, and you were receiving just punishment. So, sickness was associated with sin and therefore linked to religious attitudes. Think about the extra burden placed on someone with leprosy---or what was believed to be leprosy. (Any skin ailment might be labeled leprosy and thus warrant expulsion by a community fearing contagion.) Not only did lepers have to suffer the torments of the disease; but they had to live outside the community, even religious gatherings were prohibited to them. How, with all that community ostracization put on them, could they not get the impression that even God was against them?

The first reading from Leviticus gives us clue how those who were thought to have leprosy were treated. They were to “keep their garments rent and their heads bare...and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’” And “they shall dwell apart...,outside the

camp.” The priests were to make the judgment whether or not a person had leprosy. The priests were also those who declared a person cleansed of leprosy. You might recognize Leviticus’ vivid description of the sores of leprosy, “a scab or pustule or blotch.” We have heard these before. They are some of the afflictions God cast upon the Egyptians when Moses was trying to convince the Pharaoh to let the Israelites go (Exodus 9: 8-12). You can see what people were thinking about the leper: if lepers had the same ailments God inflicted on the obdurate Egyptians, then lepers must also be sinners.

When the priest declared a leper cleansed, that person would no longer have to live “outside the camp.” Jesus ordered the man to “go show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed, that will be proof to them.” This is more than an account of one individual being healed. The cure has social implications. Broken relationships, isolation and exclusion are now healed. The man will return to his family and the community.

It is clear that Jesus wanted to bridge the gap between himself and the leper; he “stretched out his hand, touched him....” A lesson to disciples here. Whatever has lessened human life, Jesus reaches out to touch. He does that now through us, so we cannot be uninvolved in the broken world around us where many are kept at a distance because of their race, national origin, lack of education, poverty, physical condition, gender and sexual orientation. We can write a check to help others; but that can’t be our only involvement with our broken world.

Jesus was firm to the man after the cure, he warned him “sternly” and sent him off to have the cure verified by the priest, adding, “that will be proof for them.” Proof of what? If Jesus got official recognition for the curing of the leprosy from the religious leaders, then he would have been recognized as one who frees from sin and its consequences. What a different impact Jesus might have had if he were accepted and embraced as God’s emissary by the officials of the tradition. The people’s religion would have welcomed him and his message and even helped him spread it.

In fact, the opposite happened. The cured man didn’t go to the priest, instead he publicized his cure and word spread. One imagines a certain hysteria on the part of desperate people who rush to Jesus for help of all kind. But they also made it “impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly.” Now Jesus becomes a leper, “he remained outside in deserted places....” This is the same expulsion Leviticus

describes for the leper, “they shall dwell apart, making their abode outside the camp.” Jesus really takes on our sinful condition; he is an outsider, so that outsiders can see him as one of their own and come to him.

There is also something about Jesus’ identity in the story. Mark makes it clear, as he does in other places in his gospel, that Jesus doesn’t want word to spread about him—the Marcan “messianic secret.” Jesus, in Mark, doesn’t want to be known merely as a miracle worker, for he is much more than that. More than seeing works of wonder is needed to understand who Jesus is for us. If we see him only as a wonder worker than when we don’t get the wonders we pray for or our life doesn’t produce the “successes” we expect, we are liable to doubt our faith in him. In this gospel, Jesus’ full identity and accomplishment on our behalf will only be understood if we follow him to the cross. Jesus is not the solution people might have wanted to all life’s problems. His intended ministry is being side-lined as the crowds enthusiastically search him out. They are desperate and, to them, he seems to have a quick cure. “If he cured the leper, he can cure me.” This can become, “Why didn’t he cure me when I asked, he cured the leper?”

Mark’s gospel will show that true discipleship entails more than Jesus’ handing down quick solutions for personal and communal problems. One thing the passage tells us; Jesus is not indifferent to our situation. He isn’t sitting on high watching to see how we are doing; cheering us on—at a safe distance. He did touch the leper, after all. He feels the same passionate concern for us that he showed the leper. He is quick to reach out to us.

I was with a group reflecting on this passage and some didn’t like the word “pity.” It felt patronizing, they said. They didn’t want “pity” from anyone. Biblical pity is a powerful emotion; it comes from down deep in a person, a gut reaction; it feels the pain of another; it contains tenderness and love. And more. Pity moves beyond a personal reaction at another’s situation; it moves one to do something to alleviate the suffering one has perceived. It gets a person involved in finding a solution to another’s problem; bringing relief to their misery or choosing to stand beside them and share their outcast condition. Notice the English word “compassion,” it contains “passion.” That’s what biblical pity is like—it stirs up a person to do something ---with passion.

The mystery we struggle with is: why doesn’t Jesus act more quickly, decisively and obviously?

Why does he choose to restore us by sharing our seeming impotence, suffering and death? It isn't that he will not be working with us and through us, moving us with pity to stretch out our hands to the pained and outcasts of the world. The mystery is that our success may come in our weakness; our triumphs in our failures. Just as they did for Jesus. That's not the agenda most of us like to follow—I don't even like writing it here! We shall have to trust that, as we receive him in this Eucharist, we will be able to take one more step towards embracing him and his way.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Edwina Gatley, *PSALMS OF A LAYWOMAN*. Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed and Ward, 1999. ISBN 1-58051-052-3, Paper, 142 pages.

I recently gave a woman's retreat based on the Psalms. We distributed this book as a way of providing contemporary examples of psalms and encouraging the retreatants to write their own psalms. Gatley is a minister, missionary and poet and so these psalms have strong poetic element, as do the original biblical psalms.

QUOTABLE

Fred Craddock, commenting on today's gospel passage:

All the way to the cross Jesus will be trying to get those who think "where Jesus is, there is no misery" to accept a new perspective—"where there is misery, there is the messiah."

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

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.

- Return reusable items to merchants (e.g., plastic and rubber pots to nursery; hangers to dry cleaner).

- Avoid buying Styrofoam.
- Reduce use of disposable products, or, if you must buy disposable, buy paper or glass products instead of plastic.
- Buy locally produced items when possible.
- Use reusable shopping bags.
- Keep your car tuned, tires properly inflated, and the air conditioner well maintained and only service them at repair facilities that recycle CFCs.
- Recycle engine oil.
- Drive the speed limit and accelerate and slow down gradually.
- Carpool.
- Use public transportation when possible.
- Bike or walk for short trips.

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, *"People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."*

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Marcus Mitchell # 0488288 (On death row since 11/4/97
- Jim E. Haselden (I don't know his number, but he will get your card without it.)
- Edward E. Davis # 0100579 (3/12/92

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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

"First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A.

If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, [Click Here](#).

If you would like to support this ministry, [Click Here](#) to make a secure tax-deductible online donation.

Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

FrJude@JudeOP.org