

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 7TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)
FEBRUARY 20, 2000

Isaiah 43: 18-19,21-22, 24b-25, Psalm 41 2 Corinthians 1: 18-22 Mark 2: 1-12

Dear Preachers:

Though I would not preach on a “common theme” culled from the three readings, today I do see the same emphasis in each of them. This core gospel message is summarized for us in the Pauline image that God has said a resounding “yes” on our behalf in Jesus. Each reading today echoes this “yes.” I would choose the reading you feel this message comes through the strongest and then preach out of that reading. Truth be told, this message is always in scripture readings, not just for this day.

It is important to know the context of the Isaiah reading to hear the “yes” more clearly. The section of Isaiah from which this reading is taken is called “Deutero” or “Second Isaiah.” It includes chapters 40-55 and is written by an unknown prophet to the Jews in exile. The people are in exile for their sins and unfaithfulness to God and the prophet wants to reassure them that their exile is coming to an end. The implication is clear; the end of their exile will signify that their sin has been forgiven. In 539 B.C., a short time after the prophet’s message, the conqueror Cyrus will overthrow Babylon, and the people will be allowed to go home. The prophet interprets this historical act as a liberating action by God on behalf of the people. The exiles would be freed because God has intervened on their behalf. They can forget the “events of the past,” because they will experience a new Exodus, once again God will lead them to freedom through the desert. God is not an old God, who once did marvelous deeds on behalf of the people. Rather, God is very aware of their current situation and will do something about it. God has not forgotten us, even if we forget God. God does not stop being faithful just because we have.

The people cannot take credit for this liberation. “You did not call upon me.... It is I, I, who wipe out, for my own sake, your offenses; your sins I remember no more.” No prayers recited, no good deeds done, have earned pleasure from God. We live in an exile caused by our sin, and we cannot find or make our way back. God sees our situation and takes the initiative to wipe out our offense and bring us home. Doesn’t this sound like the essence of the Gospel message? The “events of the past” are put aside and forgiveness and restoration are offered us. The “God of

the Old Testament” reveals the same characteristics as the “God of the New Testament.” Isn’t it about time we stopped making God a split personality and see that God has not changed, but has consistently said a “yes” on our behalf?

“YEESSSS!” You hear young people exclaim it when something goes very right for them. Sometimes it is accompanied by a “high five,” so common in sports after a score is made or a victory accomplished. People leap into the air and hit each other’s hands. “Yeesss!” they shout. Something terrific has happened and we are on the winning side. It sounds like Paul is giving a “high five” and shouting “Yeesss.” He is not boasting about his or our accomplishments, but about what God has done for us in Jesus. In Christ, God has said a “Yes” to us. What do we expect when we go to God in need or ask for forgiveness? Do we image God standing there with arms folded and a “well-we’ll-just-wait-and -see” expression? Do we think we have to persuade God to be on our side by pleading or cajoling God to be for us? To give us a hearing? To listen to the merits of our case? No, Paul tells us, God has made a decisive “yes” for us in Christ. God’s fidelity, promised to our ancestors, was fulfilled and affirmed for us in the life of Christ

Even our own fickleness and infidelity has not changed God’s mind and heart about us. “...God is faithful.” God has come down on our side and Jesus is the constant reminder of God’s predisposition towards us. It is the gospel message again in another image: we humans may be unfaithful; but God is unfailingly faithful to us. God, through Christ, is saying “yes” to us. How can we know this, what is our reassurance of this good news? Paul says we have been given a “seal” from God; this seal of assurance is the Spirit God has placed in our hearts. It is the “first installment” of something we will come to know and experience later when those in Christ will receive God’s final affirmation. It is like a down payment that pays part of the price for something in advance and then requires a later payment in full. The Spirit is a sign of a later full payment for us from God.

We have known the “yes” God speaks over us through Christ. We hear a “yes” each time we ask for forgiveness. We hunger and receive a “yes” to our hungers in the Eucharist. “Yes” is said over us when we know the love of another human being. “Yes” is spoken when we find a faith community and feel at home. Paul tells us that “Yes” has been spoken in our hearts by God. But he sees his own ministry as a confirmation of God’s faithfulness in the lives of his hearers. Thus, we hear the challenge, “How is my life a witness to others of God’s ‘yes’ for them? We communicate God’s “yes” when we share the good news of Christ with those

who have not heard it. God's "yes" is heard by the poor and sick when a disciple of Jesus stands with them, speaks out on their behalf or ministers to their wounds. Words are not enough. Paul makes it clear that God has not just spoken a "yes," but that through Christ, has backed up that "yes" with actions on our behalf.

We are only at the beginning of Mark's gospel, still early in Jesus' ministry. But we already see the enthusiastic following he has wherever he goes, even when he is trying to be alone in a house. Conflict accompanies the enthusiasm and today's reading begins a series of five conflict stories (2:1 to 3:6). The paralyzed man has two ailments that need tending to; he is a sinner, and he is a paralytic. For Jesus, the central concern is to tend to the man's sin, and this really startles his audience. Even if Jesus were the Messiah, they never expected the Messiah would have the power to forgive sin. The scribes get upset because Jesus is claiming to do what only God can do. If Jesus has the power to forgive sin, then this reveals his true identity. "All" acclaim God's presence in their midst---revealed when Jesus proves his point and cures the man's paralysis.

Forgiveness is a theme that enters early in this Gospel because it is at the center of the Good News. Through Jesus, God is forgiving sin. Jesus isn't just about physical healing; his renewal of humanity goes much deeper than that. Here again, Jesus shows that God has weighed the balance in our favor. In Jesus, finally and for all time, despite any doubts, God has said a "yes" to us.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

IN THIS PLACE: REFLECTIONS ON THE LAND OF THE GOSPELS FOR THE LITURGICAL CYCLES, by Marianne Race and Laurie Brink. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998 (\$19.95, paper).

A good book for lectionary preachers and those who want meditative input on the Sunday Gospels. When a place or structure (e.g. Galilee or the Temple) is mentioned in the Gospel passage, the authors give background information, "About the Site" and then provide a "Reflection." This is excellent material to feed the imagination and get the creative process started for the preparation of preaching. Both informative and prayerful.

QUOTABLE:

Capernaum: The synagogue may have been Capernaum's religious center, but surely the sea was its economic base. Clinging to its banks, Capernaum, like Bethsaida to its northeast, provided fishermen like Peter, Andrew, James, and John with a steady business, though archaeological evidence from the first century indicates that the homes were poor and the community small....

When Jesus adopts Capernaum as his hometown, he joins its first century community. He worships in its synagogue (Mark 1: 21), resides with or near Peter (Mark 2:1), heals its residents (Mark 1: 30-31), and assists in its fishing industry (Luke 5: 4). While Jesus works as an itinerant preacher, Capernaum serves as his home base, and much of his teaching occurs within a three-mile radius. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, commenting on the archaeological evidences of first-century Capernaum, notes: "No unique advantages induced Jesus to settle there; it offered nothing that could not be found in the other lakeside towns. He probably chose it because his first converts, the fishermen Peter and Andrew, lived there (Mark 1: 21,29)."

----Marianne Race and Laurie Brink, page 83-84.

READER'S RESPONSE:

I am particularly struck by the praying approach of the leper. He first knelt down to worship Jesus before he made his request. In the Jerusalem Bible translation Jesus responds: "Of course, I want to!...". Sometimes when we are sick, or in great need, all we are interested in is our sickness and how to get well. If only we could learn from the leper and adopt his method at prayer we would be equally surprised at the way the master responds to us.

-----Fr. Augustine Ntim-Duodu
Jamaica, West Indies.

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching", Jude Siciliano, OP - FrJude@JudeOP.org