

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 8<sup>TH</sup>. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)

FEBRUARY 27, 2000

Hosea 2: 16b, 17b, 21-22 Psalm 103 2 Corinthians 3: 1b-6 Mark 2: 18-22

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Wedding imagery is the strong link between the first and third readings. Hosea says that God wants to wed the people of Israel, take them out to the desert and woo them there. In Mark, Jesus uses wedding imagery when he refers to himself as the bridegroom. Anyone who has familiarity with the Hebrew scriptures will recognize immediately that Jesus’ use of wedding images is stirring up a long hoped-for fulfillment of God’s promises to the Jewish people. Jesus’ hearers would not have missed the significance of his language.

As we reflected last week---- people make a false distinction between the “God of the Old Testament” and the “God of the New Testament.” It is as if God had a personality change when Jesus appeared on the scene. For such people, today’s reading from Hosea is worth a serious reading. Hosea is reminding the people of their most noble moments, when God espoused them in the desert. Reference to the desert stirs up for the Israelites’ memory of the God who chose them and led them through the desert from slavery to the land of promise. It was in the desert that Israel came to know the fidelity and power of her God, and God’s intense love for the ones God had chosen. What seems most arduous and filled with trials in our lives can become the very place we discover the God of daily nourishment and sustenance, the God of the desert.

Through Hosea God promises that God will again express love for them in the desert. A couple words Hosea uses in this passage reveal the nature of God’s love for the Jews and for us. Parental love is suggested by the word “mercy”; its Hebrew roots signify the womb, where life- lasting ties begin. The word “know” (“you shall know the Lord”), speaks of the most intimate love between two people.

In the Hebrew scriptures, marriage is used as an image for the true relationship between God and God’s people. It is also used as a sign of the eschatological completion of that relationship, when God will once and for all time, repair what is broken in the relationship. Among the first Christians, the relation between Christ and his church was also described in terms of a marriage relationship. Thus, the deeper meaning of the wedding image in today’s Gospel reading: in Jesus the

relationship between God and the people is being brought to a fulfillment. Here in Jesus, God is repairing the breach sin has caused and is restoring us to an intimacy with God that promises no end.

Our faith is not all grimness and privation. On the contrary, the scriptures suggest that faith in Jesus is a celebration of great joy. It is a wedding at which rejoicing is the sound one hears upon entering the banquet hall. Such rejoicing is a significant part of today's eucharistic celebration in which the bonds between us and God are affirmed and any breaches in the relationship caused by sin are healed. Those who speak of faith with dour faces and too-solemn voices have not absorbed this Gospel passage.

But the serious practice of fasting also enters our Gospel thinking today. In the Jewish custom of the time, wedding guests were exempted from certain religious observances. Hence, Jesus says that as long as he is with them there is no reason to fast. The Pharisees, who have been confrontational these past weeks against Jesus, have not recognized his true identity. What was anticipated, longed for and fasted about---has arrived in the person of Jesus. There is no reason for his disciples to fast while he is with them. But the bridegroom will be taken away, he warns, and that will be a time for fasting.

The preacher might want to suggest reasons and ways of fasting. Lord knows there are numerous forms of modern "fasts" we in the first world practice; but they have nothing to do with the reign of God and our expression of longing for its full arrival. Books, programs and merchandise earn billions each year for the diet industry. Recent reports from the Food and Drug Administration tell us that, despite whole supermarket aisles of diet foods and drinks, we Americans are heavier than ever. But the suggestions about fasting in today's Gospel, call our attention to other areas that need our concern and tending.

Fasting was a way for a devout Jew to express a longing for the arrival of God's reign. When Jesus is taken away, his followers will express their longing for his return in their fasting. We want his reign to be permanently and fully among us, but there are ample signs that say this fullness is not yet. Looking at our own incompleteness and the still-broken world in which we live, we could become discouraged. But in Jesus we are promised that one day we will be freed from sin and all its evil influences. We are stirred to fast for that day. Fasting is a form of grieving; it expresses sadness for what is not yet in our world. The world is not yet

the place God desires and as a result, many suffer from this “not-yetness”. The preacher might name just the items that appear on today’s front page to exemplify the “not-yetness” of our world.

Fasting is a way to express a spiritual incompleteness, a desire to feast on God more, and on what is transitory, less. Fasting is a concrete way of remembering the promises made to us and thus keeps us from forgetting them and getting discouraged by our still incomplete lives. Some people fast as a way of standing in solidarity with friends or loved ones undergoing spiritual crises, trials and sickness. The fast underpins the prayer we offer for one another. Fasting is a very appropriate prayer response for the Christian.

I meet many people who practice different forms of fasting and for different, but related reasons. Some fast to make themselves conscious of those who lack food and clean drinking water in many parts of the world. Fasting, they say, sensitizes them to the reality of the thousands who die each day from hunger and from diseases contracted from an unhealthy environment. This cannot be what the bridegroom wants in his reign, they reason. So, until things change, and to fortify their work to bring about change, they fast.

Fasts can take many forms. We fast from a particular food or drink, for a day or an indefinite period. Or we might observe a “liquids only day.” I feel hungry this day and the hunger makes me aware of my hunger for justice, for peace or for family harmony. We can give up something we like doing, such as going to a movie or watching tv. The change in routine makes us aware of what is of even more concern for us. Fasting not only reminds us; it may strengthen a person’s resolve to do something about the gross inequalities in our world. How can we have so much, while others lack the necessities?

As I write these reflections about fasting an e-mail arrives. It comes because I am part of a North Carolina ecumenical group called, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.” I thought it would apply to the above discussion which lists reasons for fasting.

Hello!!

My name is Katia and I am writing from Italy.

I am a member of the Italian Coalition To Abolish The Death Penalty, and I would like to inform you that with the coalition we have started a hunger strike campaign

to express solidarity to the inmates at Terrel Unit and to protest against the terrible conditions there. Every day there is someone (from all over the world) who fasts and in the evening sends a fax to Bush to protest. I am the coordinator of this campaign, and my work is to coordinate people so that there won't be two people fasting the same day and none the day after!!

So, I ask you to contact me if you want to join our campaign, so that we can see which is the best day for you to fast and then I will send you the letter you will have to fax to Bush on that day. Here's my address

kldri@libero.it

I hope many of you will join. Every contribution is precious.

Thank you for listening. In the struggle,

Katia

### ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

HOMILIES FOR THE CHRISTIAN PEOPLE: CYCLES A, B, C. Edited by Gail Ramshaw. New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1989.

This is a collection of liturgical homilies by 75 preachers from various Christian traditions that are meant to lead the assembly to a deeper experience of the eucharistic celebration. Most of these homilies focus on the Gospel. Many are poetic, all are rich in biblical and liturgical symbols. Good material for meditation as one prepares to preach or attend Sunday worship.

### QUOTABLE:

From the beginning, humanity desired a love affair with the Eternal. There is Israel the bride of the Almighty, Christ the bridegroom of the church. A union in all its fullness, all its potential, could be, needed to be, must be achieved within creation. The garden once lost could be regained and once again enjoyed. So he took bread and made it new, more than the product of work and sweat and desire. Bread, born of the soil and the seed, the rain, the sun, the seasons, the hands; bread that could be chewed and savored, broken into pieces and shared with others or put aside for another time, another place; bread, a constant necessity, the sign of all that men and women must do in order to survive and enhance life: he took the bread.

He made it new. He made new what I work for, what I pray for, what I need for life; my efforts to serve you and you and you and so many others. I eat with joy

my little bit of bread, you eat it too. Together we share in my gift, my labors, myself. I in you, you in me, we all in the rest. He made it new: I am the Bread of Life....

New wine, rich, potent, delicious, and hearty, demands vessels sturdy enough to absorb its vitality, guests zealous to drain happily its promise. For he has made us new as well. By this eating and drinking, words spoken, words heard, the drama is played out again and again. God's newness nourishes, delights, beckons, invites.

---Edgar S. Brown, Jr. in, HOMILIES FOR THE CHRISTIAN PEOPLE:  
CYCLES A, B, C., page,225.

#### A READER'S FEEDBACK:

Dear Father Jude,

Thank you for First Impressions which I have been using for homily preparation. As a Lay Preacher in an area where there is a severe priest shortage, I share responsibility for the homily with another Lay Preacher on the two Sundays each month when we have a Word and Communion service. This Sunday also reminds me of the story of St. Francis of Assisi meeting the leper. Francis loathed the lepers, but on this occasion was moved to get down from his horse and embrace the leper. I plan to incorporate this story in my homily this Sunday.

Thank you again for your help.

Sincerely,

Barbara Garfield, Lavina, Montana

#### ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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