

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 8TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)

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

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

We are early in Mark's gospel, but Jesus is already meeting plenty of opposition. His presence among us brings something quite unique and there are those who cannot tolerate any change or a different perspective. People object that Jesus' disciples are not doing what the disciples of the devout Pharisees and John the Baptist did—fast. Jesus is supposed to be a man of God, they reason, so why isn't he requiring his disciples to fast as other devout religious leaders have? In the attack against Jesus' disciples, it is obvious that he himself is under fire. Disciples follow their master's teachings: attack the disciple and thus attack the master.

One reason for his response to his questioners has to do with the nature of fasting itself. When there is a lack in our lives and we want to express that lack, one way to do it is to fast. We feel a lack of God—we fast. The world lacks peace and we yearn for it—we fast. Fasting gets our bodily selves involved and in line with our spiritual longings. The whole person is united for a reason. The one who fasts is saying in all his/her being, “I hunger for God...for direction...for peace...for forgiveness, etc.”

In Jesus' time one reason people fasted was in anticipation and longing for the messiah. But if the messiah has arrived, Jesus is implying, there is no reason for that fast! So, Jesus, using familiar wedding images, tells those who ask him about fasting, “...the bridegroom is with them.” What had been longed for, has happened in Jesus. God's awaited reign has arrived. Jesus' presence has brought a reason for joy and rejoicing. This is not the time for austerity and somber moods. A wedding requires celebration! However, there is an ominous note in Jesus' wedding imagery; a time will come when the bridegroom will “be taken away from them”--- not “leave them” ---but “taken away.” There is a hint here of what will eventually happen to Jesus.

Medical journals in recent weeks have noted a health problem among Americans. One third of us are clinically obese, with a total of forty percent overweight. It isn't just in food that we have trouble limiting ourselves. As a nation we have so much. We are excessive in many areas of consumption, recreation and entertainment. When Jesus tells his disciples there will be a time for fasting, he isn't promoting a

weight loss program. There are more serious reasons to fast than our own pants and dress sizes. We may need to fast to become more conscious of the those in our world who have no choice in matters of food and material goods. We might fast to become sensitive to the starving in Africa and the undernourished children in our country; those who can't afford basic medications and the 20 million in Africa who have AIDS—but lack access to existing medications. At this writing the forces of war are mounting in our land; why not fast for peace ?

We face huge problems in the world, what possible good can fasting do? Well, the greatest religious leaders who ever lived fasted and accomplished great deeds to change the world. Here one is reminded Jesus himself and his own desert fast. Our immediate world will be affected by fasting; we may get more clarity about the direction of our lives. Fasting can help open our eyes to others, especially those who are doing without and have no choice in the matter.

Fasting has many sizes and shapes. We will have to determine what is appropriate for ourselves. We can enter a serious daily fast or perhaps fast one day a week from a particular food or drink; from television; from unnecessary shopping; from noise (shut off the radio when alone). In today's preaching the preacher has an opportunity to help the congregation begin to think about Lent. It starts next week and this is a good time to start thinking about fasting and praying for what we or our world hungers.

The brief parable Jesus uses about the wedding and the bridegroom's presence, shows that the present events dictate how one is to respond; religious practices we perform are a response to what is going on around us. At a wedding there is rejoicing and celebration. When the bridegroom is "taken away," another response is appropriate—fasting. At eucharist we celebrate with joy the presence of the "bridegroom." We rejoice as if at a wedding. Thus, we feel the presence of the bridegroom when we celebrate the wonderful events of daily life. Thus, we know his presences and have reason to celebrate when: we are surrounded by loved ones; experience the free gift of forgiveness; celebrate a wedding anniversary; have a home blessed; receive a hug or kiss from a child; a friend stops by to visit; a phone call cheers us up, etc. These and many other events reveal to the believer's eyes the presence of the bridegroom. There is no thought of fasting at these times..

But we experience the bridegroom's absence as well. He has been "taken away" from us when: war is chosen as a solution to international conflict; the poor lack

what is needed for health, nourishment and education; the aged are neglected; creation is abused and despoiled; conflict forms the daily atmosphere in a marriage; forgiveness is withheld; religion is practiced only under obligation and for ritual display, etc. When the believer senses powerful forces have “taken the bridegroom,” then there is reason to fast, to bring about interior conversion, to strengthen conviction and forge resolve to work for the necessary changes that will evoke his spirit. The eucharist celebrates Jesus’ presence among us. But when we are experiencing his absence in our world and we are fasting, then the eucharist is food for our deep hungers. It helps us persevere in our prayer and fasting and strengthens us in our efforts to make the bridegroom’s presence felt through our lives.

The heart of Jesus’ invitation to his followers is an invitation to a deep and complete change. He uses some simple images to make his point. While his presence is a time of joy and celebration for those who accept him, he does require a break with the past. Any “old cloak,” old way, even old religious practice, will no longer do. To wake up to him is to put aside the past and reorient our present life with a new future in mind. He doesn’t want a patch of convenience; a slight change in us. His is a whole new fabric, an entirely new way of living. We have to ask ourselves if our faith in him has only minor effects on our lives: just slight shifts in who we are, how we behave and how we see the world around us. If having Jesus in our lives hasn’t completely affected the way we live and view our world, then we have just made patch-work changes, we have tried to put what is entirely new wine in an inadequate old wineskin.

QUOTABLE

"Pastoral preaching is truth rising out of a compassionate heart and finding voice. It is truth taking on the flesh of words and deeds. The pastoral preacher is a bearer of hope."

-Carla Mae Streeter, O.P. in, DOMINICAN ASHRAM.

ENVIRONMENTAL 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.

--- Invest your money in environmentally and socially conscious businesses.

---Remove yourself from mailing lists you do not want to be on by contacting offending organizations/
companies.

---Avoid using chemical lawn products and suggest that area parks and churches investigate organic
alternatives.

---Adopt a highway or waterway.

---Contact trucking and cab companies whose vehicles spew black smoke and complain. Black smoke usually means their vehicles are not burning fuel completely, thereby costing them money.

---Try to eat a vegetarian diet once a week.

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:.....

- Kenneth B. Rouse #0353186 (On the Row since 3/25/92)
- Michael M. Reeves # 0339314 (5/14/92)
- Eddie C. Robinson #0347839 (5/19/92)
- Dwight L. Robinson #0347829 (6/2/92)

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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