

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 1st SUNDAY OF LENT -C-
Deuteronomy 26:4-10 Psalm 91 Romans 10: 8-13 Luke 4: 1-13
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

In a conversation someone was described to me this way: “She walks the talk.” It’s an expression I have heard in recent years. The first time I heard it was in a prison chapel. I had been asking about a guard who had impressed me and a prisoner told me, “That guy walks the talk.” I’ve heard that expression used many times since then to describe someone whose words and actions matched: they were true to their promises, lived up to their responsibilities and didn’t deceive anyone with boasts or self-aggrandizement. “He walks the talk”—I began to hope that someday I would be referred to in that way. It is quite a compliment, whether it’s about an inmate, guard, or someone outside the walls-- “on the streets”----or in the church!

We have invested ourselves in the words of others, structured our lives because of something someone told us: A woman has been given a diagnosis of cancer and dreads both the treatment and the effects it will have on those around her. Her husband promises, “Don’t worry, I will be there for the you.” A young mother tells her 3 year old daughter who is about have her tonsils out, “Don’t worry, when you wake up, mommy and daddy will be right here smiling at you.” A groom tells his bride, “...till death do us part.” A wife reassures her husband, “I forgive you.” We place our confidence on words like these; they enable us to go ahead into the uncertain or painful future; pick up and risk starting all over again. They give us new life. We trust that the person who speaks such promises and reassurances to us, “Walks the talk.”

We also hold God to God’s word----we want God to “walk the talk.” In Jesus, God has spoken a Word about being one of us in our human journey, not just in external appearances--- but fully with us. If God takes flesh, we don’t want an android, like a Star Trek character, who looks human, but feels no pain, experiences no emotional highs and lows, grieves no deaths. We want God-enfleshed to feel what we feel when we are loved, hated, betrayed, encouraged, challenged, etc. If God is going to become one with us we want to know that God isn’t just putting on a show of smoke and mirrors, but is truly “walking the talk.”

The temptations are at the beginning of Jesus' ministry when he begins his journey, his walk with us. He extends an invitation for us to join him—to walk the way he walks in the world. Today's gospel takes place after Jesus has just been baptized by John in the Jordan. No sooner has the walk started than Jesus meets the Tempter. The devil challenges how real Jesus' immersion among is will be. Will he command the stone to become bread? In other words, will he know physical hunger and pain, as well as the same longings of the heart we do; or will he just use his powers and satisfy his needs and wants at whim? Will he choose to attract followers by spectacle, by filling their bellies with nothing more lasting than a quick meal? If he fell for the temptation, he would have skipped over the physical and emotional pain we all must have at one time or another. In addition, he would have attracted followers who would have stayed on as long as the free lunch lasted; only until it got too painful to follow him.

The devil has more to offer Jesus. Having shown Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world” the devil makes an offer many humans have, to one degree or another, accepted: Jesus can gain power and influence by worshiping at the altar of power, compromise and deals. We are in the first throes of an election year. Things are heating up, promises are made to a population needing and looking for leaders of integrity, wisdom, compassion and strength. One hopes that the candidates we are hearing from don't secretly prostrate themselves before “the powers that be” to get the presidency—which, as the most powerful position in the world, gives a person “power and glory” over “the kingdoms of the world.” In rejecting this temptation, Jesus chooses to live an ordinary person's life, to undergo the subjection endured by his neighbors in an occupied land. He will walk the path of the oppressed. Those without name recognition will see in him one who is totally faithful in his choice to be human.

The devil goes on: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘God will command the angels concerning you, to guard you....’” It is tempting to think that a proof of God's love for us is a comfortable and pain free life. Certainly this notion of a protected life, of expecting to be spared of all pain and disappointment as God's beloved, would be a temptation throughout Jesus' entire life, especially as he endured his passion. Where is God when we are suffering? I thought God loved me. If God really loved me I wouldn't be in this pain.....failed at this project....been betrayed by those I trusted...etc. But there doesn't seem to have been an escape clause written into Jesus' being one of us.

He didn't get out in the nick of time; and so his followers must resist the temptation to opt out when the path of discipleship brings suffering. Nor would Jesus try to attract people to him by shows of divine favor. There would be no quick rescue by God when the forces of evil closed in on him; no angels to show up to protect him. That's just not what it means for us humans, and so that's not what it will mean for Jesus as he fulfills his word to be one with us.

Having listened to the tempting offers made by the devil, Jesus turns away from the tempter and towards us. Like us he will stumble and get hurt, know hunger and see his project collapse. He will risk all, placing his message into the hands, not of the powerful, but ordinary people like us. He takes a chance on them, trusts his future to them. The devil has asked him, in effect, "Will you walk totally with these humans? Take their journey to the end? Avoid easy outs, and a flashy success story? Jesus' response, as evidenced in today's gospel, is "Yes I will." The rest of the gospel shows us he walked the talk.

A man I know went to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. As he entered the room, he saw broken and needy people. His response, "I am not like one of those people." Too bad, if he had admitted his need and identified with the others in the room, he might have been able to change his life. Lent has begun for us. It is like entering a room that contains others like us: people who have strayed from their commitments; fallen or stumbled; made new resolutions kept them with only some success. All in this room of Lent need forgiveness, all of us need, to one degree or another, to make adjustments in our life's game plan. We all need to "walk the talk."

No one forces us into this Lent. We need to choose it for ourselves. We look into this new room we are entering, this Lent, see the folks around us and say, "I am like these people. I too need to face myself and be true to my better self." It is tempting to pull out, or enter this season half-heartedly. But if we desire to "walk the talk" of being Christians together, then we need this Lent to reorient us. Lent helps us find our true self. Jesus did that in the desert. By denying who he was not, he affirmed his true identity--- one sent by God to walk our human path in fidelity to God, even in times of failure and pain. What he did, we can do, because our baptism has given us the gift of the Spirit, the same Spirit that was Jesus' in the desert when he chose to walk the talk with us.

A few words about the first reading: there we are reminded that we have a God who sees our affliction and misplaced affections and comes to rescue us. We need to be reminded of this God, so that we can enter Lent with the right focus. While we recall our sinfulness, we don't stay focused on our wanderings and sinful deeds, but on the mercy assured us by God. It is to this God that we offer the gifts. Like the ancient Jews offering the gift of their first fruits, we are reminded of who God has been for us and we place hope in God's ongoing presence with us, always ready to lead us back.

This passage from Deuteronomy is part of the long instruction Moses delivers to the people of Israel as they are about to enter the Promise Land. He is telling them about the feast of the first fruits. Here are given both the ceremony and the words to be said to celebrate God's gifts. The gifts they are to offer, "the first fruits of the products of the soil," come from their daily labors as farmers. Two ends of the spectrum of their lives are united--their work and their worship. Here's something to think about during Lent. How can we keep in perspective the unity of our lives? Why divide our lives into portions and make two compartments: what is "sacred" from what is "secular"? What if we saw our daily labors more in relation to God and as ways to offer to God the gifts God has already given us? What if we saw what we labor at each day as an opportunity to worship God? We say we go to "the daily grind"--- "another day, another dollar", we say. Not to overly romanticize some unhealthy working conditions, but nevertheless, isn't there somehow we can serve God there?

QUOTABLE

If we simply repeat the formulas of the past, our words may have the character of doctrine and dogma but they will not have the character of good news. We may be preaching perfectly orthodox doctrine but it is not the gospel for us today. We must take the idea of good news seriously. If our message does not take the form of good news, it is simply not the Christian gospel."

----Albert Nolan, O.P. in, GOD IN SOUTH AFRICA.

JUSTICE NOTES

When considering economic, social and environmental policies on behalf of agriculture and rural communities, The National Catholic Rural Life Conference considers the following as one of its principles:

Universal Destination of Goods

The earth is God's and is created for the well-being of all. Creation and all its goods are plainly for the good of all. We believe and accept that private ownership of goods is a natural right. So what is the best mechanism to distribute the goods of the earth? What is our measure of social equality that limits economic concentration of wealth and reduces the causes of poverty?

We say that on every private ownership there is a social mortgage: If bread is good for life, then bread for all is a goal worthy of us as human beings in universal solidarity. Greed, excess profits, and control by a few of the goods meant for many – these are contrary to God's desire that creation is for the good of all.

The universal destination of goods is plain to see: each person in the world is meant to receive enough to eat and drink, enough to clothe and house themselves, and enough to live in human dignity. In rural life, we need to realize that farmers continue to be squeezed by those who control farm inputs/supplies and by those who farmers must sell to. In some cases, farmers are caught in the grip of a single firm both supplying inputs and receiving the food or fiber produced, leaving the farmer vulnerable to monopolistic practices.

The destination and accessibility of goods today is twisted by our society's fascination with bigness and technology. The big operator or producer is favored over the small family farmer – these scales of size are weighed against the common good because global corporate interests win political and financial favors mainly for themselves. What might be called the "common good" is lost in the abyss between winners and losers, those who grow big and those who get pushed out.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"All I can say to the family is that I am sorry for your loss. I did not kill Diane or her daughter... I don't think the people of North Carolina would want that on their consciences, to kill an innocent man...."

Dawud Abdullah Muhammad (Born David Junior Brown). Executed November 19, 1999, Central Prison, Raleigh, North Carolina.

-----From the Canadian Coalition Against the Death Penalty's webpage

There are six women on Raleigh's death row. Here are the names of three. 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:.....

Melanie S. Andersen #0547365 (On death row since 9/26/96)

Blanche T. Moore #0288088 (11/16/90)

Patricia W. Jennings #0207779 (11/5/90)

-----North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women

1034 Bragg Street Raleigh, NC 27610

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C" This compilation, from past "First Impressions," includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for this liturgical year. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage address: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/>
(Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Leobardo Almazan, Juan Torres, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "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, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com