

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT -C-

Exodus 3: 1-8a, 13-15 Psalm 103 1 Corinthians 10: 1-6, 10-12 Luke 13: 1-9

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Are we standing on unstable ground? That’s a big question in cities on our west coast since they are prone to earthquakes. City and state governments have stiff building codes to protect their inhabitants from the dangers of earthquakes. Plans for houses, bridges and public buildings have to meet these codes before construction is allowed. Older edifices must be “retrofitted” and brought up to code. You don’t want to be in a vulnerable building or traveling on a bridge that isn’t earthquake proof during a quake.

Paul calls such precautions to mind today as he warns us, “...those who think they are standing secure should take care not to fall.” But he is not a Californian building inspector checking out earthquake precautions in your home. His concern is more penetrating. He is advising us to look to the structural foundations of our lives; the health of our spirits. He cautions that, while God has rescued us from sin, as God once delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, so we are not to rest secure on our status as “God’s children” or as “Christians.” We are, Paul reminds us, living in “the end of ages”—and we need to live in conscious care not to fall. No one should take one’s footing for granted. Check out, Paul says, the ground on which you stand, the manner of life you lead.

Christians, says Paul, are like the Israelites who experienced God’s care as they traveled across the wilderness. We have received a similar care. Paul makes some explicit parallels: The Israelites were fed manna in the desert; we have the eucharistic bread today. The Israelites were “baptized into Moses,” they became God’s people under Moses; we have been initiated into Christ through our baptism. The Israelites drank from the rock; we drink from Christ, our source of living water on our journey. Paul says accounts of the grumblings and subsequent punishment of the Israelites is a warning to us. We too can become complacent, can take our standing before God for granted. We may think we are standing on the rock of Christ, when in fact, we are not as secure as we think.

Paul deliberately wants to be a trembler for us; he wants to shake us up. He wants

us to move away from a complacent faith of habit and false presumptions. Lent is a good time to hear this message. We need to attend to Paul's call to conversion. Once we reflect on the lukewarm nature of our faith, we might realize we are standing on insecure ground and then turn again to God and the more secure footing that is our faith in Jesus and a life that better conforms to his.

Current events, especially tragedies that affect large numbers of people, are distressing and puzzling to believers. Innocent people suffer at the hands of military dictatorships or crazed crowds of rival religions or ethnic backgrounds. Large accidents also appall and grieve us, as when we hear about a fuel train going from Iran to Iraq that has blown up killing several hundred innocent people living in neighboring communities. We can't help but ask, "What did those poor people do to deserve that?"

The people of Jesus' time had a different take on such tragedies and their popular notions are the background to today's gospel episode. Some horrific event seems to have happened in Jerusalem and Jesus' listeners mention it to him. Apparently Pilate killed some Galileans while they were offering animal sacrifices in the city. Imagine the indignation religious people would feel over still one more brutal act by the occupying forces. They would feel sorry for the victims and their families. But they also believed that when a tragedy happened the victims must have been culpable of some wrong and that God was dealing out justice by punishing them. When people suffer misfortune there does tend to be a "spectator mentality" that emerges from those not affected. Maybe we feel "blessed" to have been spared the misfortune. Some even say, "There but for the grace of God go I."—as if our good fortune is a sign of God smiling on us.

Jesus may have been aware of this kind of complacent thinking by those who report the news to him and so he shakes up his listeners. Were those who died, he asks, "greater sinners than all other Galileans?" Jesus uses this tragedy and the one of the Siloam tower collapsing and killing eighteen, as a way to remind those people that even though they may not have been one of the victims in the tragic events, still they were not as secure as they may have been feeling. A tragedy can happen to anyone and at any time. He wants them and us to appraise our lives. For example, a life of lots of goods, may not be such a good life after all; or feeling secure may in fact be based on a false sense of well being. The traditional reminder used at the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday comes to mind:

“Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return.” Life has a way of taking surprising and precipitous turns and Jesus’ response in today’s story questions our own preparedness.

Like the Pauline reading, today’s gospel gives us a similar sense of urgency and impending doom. The gospel reiterates what Paul has already mentioned: we must make sure to “stand secure” and “take care not to fall.” It would be foolish, both readings suggest, to put things off for a later period. Now is a time of crisis, whether it seems that way or not, and we need to take action.

But remember that God’s grace is at the root of all growth and healing in us. This Lenten time is like the extra time given to the fruitless fig tree: change is necessary and only a certain period is allotted us to make the changes. The parable has its sense of doom about it. A fig tree was expected to bear fruit by the time it was three years old. If it didn’t any practical farmer would have cut it down and planted another so as to get fruit. The tree is taking up soil and space and is defeating the purpose of the farmer who wants to harvest figs. Still, the tree in the parable is given another year; this is an unexpected surprise and an account of undeserved grace. Nevertheless, fruit is still required and after a fixed period of time the owner will come back into the orchard. If there is no fruit then, the tree will be cut down. Note that the tree is not able to take care of itself. It needs the gardener to improve its condition. Repentance and change are not our works to accomplish alone this Lent. This is not a season for pep talks that encourage working harder. God is the careful gardener who offers us the chance to change. Ours is the responsibility to respond to the ways God is coming to us this Lent. In particular, at this eucharist we receive the living presence of the Lord who comes in this graced time to help us secure our footing and keep us planted in the place, this worshipping community ---- where God comes in a special way to bring healing and change ---at this lenten time.

QUOTABLE

“The present collection...is an effort to demonstrate through actual homilies a long-standing conviction of mine: it is impossible to preach a good homily that is not a justice homily in the biblical understanding of justice.”

—Walter Burghart, S.J., in the Preface to, LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN LIKE WATERS.

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

"Can you imagine what it's like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it's like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, 'I love you. I'll see you next week,' when you never know if they're going to call and say, 'He's up

next—it's time for his execution.””

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder. [The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Alan Gell was found innocent two weeks ago!!!

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:.....

Wayne A. Laws #0234897 (On death row since 8/21/85)

Timothy Allen #005205 (12/6/85)

John W. Jones #0216650 (8/16/90)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

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, 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,

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