

“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:

Today's gospel episode takes place in the midst of Luke's travel narrative (9:51-18:14). At the beginning of this section Jesus has turned his face towards Jerusalem (9:51). Today's passages is an incident on the road to the Holy City. In the preceding passages Jesus has been stressing an impending crisis and calling for a turn to God.,

The story begins with a report of two chilling events. Pilate has slaughtered some Galileans during their offering of sacrifice in Jerusalem. Imagine the outrage in the voices of those who are telling this to Jesus. (This may have been a trap for Jesus, similar to the question about paying taxes to Caesar. They may want Jesus to say something against Pilate and the Roman occupiers.) The other calamity was an accident, a tower in Siloam has collapsed and killed 18 people. These events raise the kinds of questions we ask when innocent people suffer. Why must they suffer? What have they done to deserve this? In our own day recent events raise such questions. India suffers an earthquake and tens of thousands die or are displaced; in El Salvador another series of earthquakes kills scores of people, levels towns and in an aftershock, destroys a school with children inside attending classes; a Palestinian drives a bus into a crowd of waiting passengers and kills 8; the Israeli army assassinates a Palestinian official in the streets, etc. (Unfortunately more such devastating acts will have happened from the time I am writing this till this third Sunday in Lent.)

In the popular belief of the day, people would have seen these catastrophes as some kind of punishment from God. Jesus contradicts this common belief of theirs which held that diseases, poverty, and tragedies were the consequences of people's sins. The poor today still suffer under this misconception. And some who see the poor in their misery ascribe their plight to some imagined fault or sin of their own, such as laziness, lack of ambition, and "inferior" national or racial traits. Related to this is the tendency to blame the victim for what happens to him or her. (E.g. an abused spouse, an accident victim, someone who has been raped, etc.) So, not only do the unfortunate have harsh lives, they must live under the

notion that it is their fault, “they deserve what they get.”

Jesus dismisses this link between misfortune and sin. For him, the real sin is to be the ones responsible to bear fruit and not to have done so. We are “planted” where we are and we are called to be responsible disciples doing God’s work in whatever calling we have. Of course we are not as fruitful as we should be, indeed some bear no fruits whatsoever, since they are totally involved in selfish pursuits. For us all, there is Lent, when we are given time and help to change. Is it any wonder that today’s Gospel passage is linked with the call to Moses through whom God plans to free the enslaved Israelites?

God is intent on saving the people and is taking the initiative to do just that. God has not stopped reaching out to us in whatever generation we live to free us from any slavery that now keeps us from freedom and from fruitfulness.

The voice of the gardener is a voice for mercy. More time is being given the fig tree to produce. But the fig tree can’t do it on its own and so the gardener will take steps that will enable the tree to be fruitful. Here again the core gospel message shows itself. The parable is not a “shape-up-or-else” story. If we are to change the direction of our lives this Lent or take a stronger, more committed orientation to God, then we will need help. It is typical for us Americans, who worship at the altar of independence and self reliance, to think we can pull ourselves up by our own boot straps. “We’ll just grit our teeth this Lent and change our lives. I’ll give up candy or movies or wine as a discipline to make myself better.” But that’s just our work ethic overflowing into our work-spirituality. The work is done first by the gardener. Of course results are expected, but we need help first. Coming in the midst of Lent, this parable reminds us that God is gracious and on our side to effect change. Now let’s see what we can do, what fruits we can bear!

Lent is the gift of time, of heightened awareness, for it calls us to tend to what needs tending. The tragedies of the unfortunate Galileans and the Siloam victims are used to call attention to the suddenness of their deaths. We shudder when we hear when someone our age, or someone we know, experiences a tragic illness or accident. While we feel pain for them, we resolve to be more appreciative of the life we have. Or, if we are the ones who have the sicknesses or accident we say, “If only I had....” So, the stories in today’s Gospel are wake up calls to get us to

do something about our lives while we still have time.

While being careful not to allegorize the parable, we observe that the tree is not on its own in its need to bear fruit, there is the gardener. We look around at those celebrating Eucharist with us this morning. We are not alone, but have each other's support and encouragement to live a life marked by our faith. We also have God's Word to give us strength and guidance to the path of fruitfulness. The "gardener" takes many forms and manifestations in our daily lives. God is always on our side sending help and encouragement in our need to change and live lives that are rich and nourishing for ourselves and others.

### THE SCRUTINIES

A couple years ago, John Konicek, S. J., a liturgist from Boston College, sent us some input about the "Scrutinies."

But first he commented on suggestion that the preacher might have the congregation sit down during the reading of a long Gospel narrative. He writes:

...by the way, it is perfectly "liturgically correct" to invite people to be seated for a long gospel passage. I imagine that the practice of standing is simply what is left of a liturgy which originally had people standing throughout the entire service. This posture was taken merely because chairs were only for the wealthy. People either stood or sat on the floor.

For this liturgical year we will preach from Cycle C of the Lectionary. But the readings for the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays in Lent are [taken from the A cycle] every year for a community with the Elect. The Elect are persons who have completed the Catechumenate, the time of instruction and growth in knowledge of the ways of the Christian faith and the Christian community. The Catechumenate proper comes to a close upon the Rite of Election which coincides with the beginning of Lent.

The journey through Lent for the Elect or the "illuminandi" (those who will be enlightened) includes the observance of the Scrutinies on the last Sundays of Lent. "Scrutiny" finds its origins in a word which means "to pick through the trash". In our society, which has so long tried to decorate, diminish or cover over sin and evil in our midst, the word scrutiny breaks through this tempering to call us to take

an authentic look at ourselves.

For the Elect, Lent is a time of purification and enlightenment through intense spiritual preparation. The minds and hearts of the Elect grow in their knowledge of Christ the Savior. As part of the rites belonging to the period of purification and enlightenment, the scrutinies are meant to “uncover, then heal all that is weak, defective, or sinful in the hearts of the elect; to bring out, then strengthen all that is upright, strong and good.” (RCIA #141)

The Scrutinies make use of the Cycle A readings even if we are actually in year B or C. Strong imagery can be found especially in the gospels for the scrutiny Sundays. For the first scrutiny on the Third Sunday of Lent, the spirit of each of the Elect are filled with Christ who is the living water (gospel of the Samaritan women). The second scrutiny declares that Christ is the light of the world (gospel of the man born blind). By the third scrutiny the Elect have progressed in their understanding of sin and redemption, and can now hear proclaimed that Christ is the resurrection and the life (gospel of the raising of Lazarus).

For those parishes or communities which do not often have catechumens, or at Masses where the Elect are not present, the Fourth Sunday might be an ideal occasion to preach about the journey of the Elect, of their conversion, and time and prayer needed for their preparation for joining the Christian community at Easter. Because the Elect can be referred to as the “illuminandi”, preaching on this Fourth Sunday could make use of the images of light and darkness, of illumination and seeing clearly, of not being deceived by the night of sin. With all liturgy, rites function more than just for those on whom the rites are being “performed.” The scrutinies serve not only the Elect, but all the faithful in the assembly as well, so that they may also “derive benefit” from these celebrations.

#### RESOURCES FOR THE PREACHING:

Catherine Hilkert, OP, Ph.D., who teaches in Notre Dame’s theology department, recommends the following:

Edward Hahnenberg "Letting Experience Touch the Psalter". It has a section on preaching the psalms--very well done. ASSEMBLY, Vol. 27, No. 2, March 2001, 10-11, 16.

James W. Thompson, *PREACHING LIKE PAUL: HOMILECTICAL WISDOM FOR TODAY* (Westminster/John Knox, 2001).

"Today we preach to the children of those listeners whom we were attempting to address with revitalized sermons a generation ago. These children, however, have grown up in a post-Christian culture that is not familiar with the Bible. Unlike their parents, whose familiarity with the Christian faith produced boredom the new homiletics sought to overcome, many Christians today do not know the basics of the Christian message. This change in the cultural situation is crucial to recognize, and it creates special challenges for preachers at the beginning of the new millennium. A homiletic that solved the problems of preaching in the final days of a Christian culture is not likely to be the solution to the problems of preaching in a post-Christian culture."

----Thompson, page 1.

#### QUOTABLE:

"We tend to think of Lent as a time to increase acts of personal devotion and piety. The second reading and the gospel suggest that Lent addresses itself just as much to the Church as an established institution. Like all institutions, it is often threatened by a false sense of security. We have the warning example of Israel. In the wilderness the old people of God were lulled into a false sense of security when Yahweh, fulfilling his [sic] promise to Moses in the burning bush, brought his people out of Egypt through the cloud and the sea, fed them with manna, and quenched their thirst with water from the rock. We also have the warning example of the new Israel. The Corinthians were lulled into a false sense of security by their possession of the two sacraments of the gospel. The homilist should not find it difficult to apply these warnings to the contemporary Church as an institution today. 'Unless you repent, you will likewise perish'".

-----Reginald Fuller in *PREACHING THE LECTIONARY: THE WORD OF GOD FOR THE CHURCH TODAY*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1984. Pages 411-12.

#### READER' RESPONSE"

It is interesting, the Gospels from these two Sunday's define who Jesus is. Lk 4:1ff affirms the full humanity of Jesus with his temptations. Lk 9:28ff affirms the full divinity of Jesus with Peter's pronouncement and the Transfiguration! These two passages should leave no doubt in anyone's mind who Jesus is.

----Deacon Leonard G. Soper

### **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](mailto:Jboll@opsouth.org) or [jboll@preacherexchange.org](mailto: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.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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