

First Impressions PALM SUNDAY

(Luke 19: 28-40) Is. 50: 4-7 Philippians 2: 6-11 Luke 22: 14- 23:56

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I am focusing today on the gospel procession passage (Luke 19: 28-40) that begins today's liturgy. Throughout this liturgical year, in Luke's gospel, we have been hearing Jesus say, "I must go up to Jerusalem." The opening words of today's gospel of procession announce that, "Jesus proceeded on his journey up to Jerusalem." Today we hear of the final part of his journey to the holy city. He is riding a colt and greeted by "the whole multitude of his disciples" who praise God, "for all the mighty deeds they have seen." This is a climatic moment for Jesus and his disciples. Their journey to Jerusalem is ending and another is about to begin---the excited disciples have no clue what is about to happen. We have arrived at a climatic moment. With Jesus and his disciples we are entering Holy Week.

Jesus enters the city from the East, from the same direction as the rising sun. A new day is beginning. Old ways are being put aside. Darkness is overcome. On this new day, death is no longer the end of life; success is no longer the valid measure of a person or any of our personal projects; power no longer has complete and lasting control over a people; violence no longer is the way to deal with opposition. Today a new day is beginning; today Jesus enters Jerusalem. Today speaks clearly to us: have no doubts, God is not indifferent to human plight; human suffering has not fallen on deaf ears. God has heard our cry for help. Today, Jesus goes up to Jerusalem.

In Jesus' time, going to Jerusalem was an important and joyful event. Devout Jews went to the city to observe important feasts and rituals. Jerusalem had great symbolic power for believers, for the Temple was in Jerusalem and it was in and around the Temple that important ceremonies were performed. But the Romans were there too and so the city was a place of convergence, not only of religious power and authority, but also of social, military and economic forces. For many reasons, Jerusalem was the center of the Jewish world. So, Jesus goes to the place where religious and secular powers are concentrated and he goes there at an important festival time, the feast of Passover.

Jesus and his disciples knew how dangerous this fateful journey would be. Neither the religious nor the military powers in the city could ignore Jesus' presence. His theological position, about God's compassion for sinners and inclusion of outcasts, was too upsetting to the status quo the religious leadership was trying to maintain. There were many diverse opinions and movements in Jewish tradition, but Jesus' teachings about God's reign had gone too far for most of the religious establishment. And in going to a seat of Roman power, Jesus was confronting the world's might in all its oppressive and cruel manifestations. Once Jesus enters Jerusalem the powers in charge move quickly, he is promptly captured, sentenced and nailed to the cross.

Why go up to Jerusalem at all? Why not "lay low" and stay out of trouble? Or, continue preaching—but from a safe distance. By his entering Jerusalem Jesus challenges our accommodation to all kinds of power—our "modern Jerusalems,"---our misplaced respect for: powerful government; religious status; middle class values; physical and intellectual achievement; economic success, etc. We could just fall back on our baptism, say our prayers and hope for our resurrection. But Jesus entered Jerusalem and he challenges each of us to confront our contemporary Jerusalems. Where do we bow to power; who and what rule our lives? What concessions have we made and how do we evade the challenges our belief in the gospel require us to face?

Jesus confronts all that Jerusalem represents and he seems to lose to the reigning power. He submits, doesn't fight, or hide or try to outwit the powers. He chooses to be there, in Jerusalem, exposed to all the forces against him. It looked like Jesus was a loser; God seemed to have gambled and lost. But Jesus' submission really was a confrontation with evil: he did not run away, his suffering was God's way of working through him. Through Jesus' loss, we are all winners.

Each of us believers must join Jesus and go "up to Jerusalem." Like Jesus, our personal Jerusalem may be a place where we seem to be losers: where our faith values are disregarded or trashed; where we face daily encounters with forces that oppose our best efforts; where political structures defeat the disenfranchised; where the world of high tech and privileged education broaden the gap between the haves and the have-nots. We are called to be present to our own experience of Jerusalem and there we are invited to take up the cross and risk what previously we have cherished and clung to. But first, before we straighten our shoulders and prepare

for the struggle we must let Jesus go ahead of us. We follow him into the city this week; watch how he surrenders to God's ways and identify with his loss. But, through his death and resurrection we also experience new life.

Why are we waving our palms for today? Not because everything goes well in our world; not because there is no suffering—not while there are ongoing wars, civil strife, AIDS throughout the world, terrorism, drugs and on and on! We are not waving our palms in ecstatic religious display with our eyes closed to reality. No, there is too much suffering in the world for that; the good, the poor and the vulnerable are not spared suffering. Jesus reminds us of that today. Rather, God has entered our “holy city” —the places of defeats and pain and transformed them. God has personally confronted evil, walked the same path we have. But not in the triumphal way we might have, instead God has contradicted our usual ways of dealing with evil might and chosen instead the cross—as Paul says, a way that our world judges as foolishness and a scandal.

Because Jesus chose to enter the Holy City, every place we suffer can become a holy city for us, a place God chooses to visit and share with us—most especially those places where, like Jesus, we choose to confront religious hypocrisy and worldly powers.

We know what the excited crowds at the entrance to the city don't know. At this point they smell triumph in the air, they expect a victorious Jesus to sweep into power and they with him. In Jerusalem their plans would collapse, their hopes would be dashed. We know what they didn't and couldn't know at this stage of their journey with Jesus: that early on the morning of the third day, the first day of the week, while it was still dark, God would show God's power and raise Jesus from the tomb. The powers of death would be overcome. Triumph would come from catastrophe; life from death; hope from despair and despite all appearances to the contrary—then and now---evil would be defeated.

Now, no matter how powerful the forces against good are, we do have reason to hope. That is why we are waving our palms in the air. That is why, with Jesus and the rest of his disciples, we are entering Jerusalem today.

PRAYERS FOR PREACHERS

(I recently asked readers to submit prayers for preachers. Here is one.)

A MINISTER'S PRAYER BY MARTIN LUTHER

Lord, God, thou hast placed me in thy church as a Pastor. Thou seest how unfit I am to administer this great and difficult office. Had I hitherto been without help from Thee, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore I call on Thee. I gladly offer my mouth and heart to Thy service. I would teach Thy people and I myself would continue to learn. To this end I shall meditate diligently on Thy Word. Use me, dear Lord, as thy instrument. Only do not forsake me; for if I were to continue alone, I would quickly ruin everything. Amen.

----submitted by Tom Miller, Lead Pastor, Morning Star Lutheran (ELCA), Omaha, NE.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

A CRUCIFIED CHRIST IN HOLY WEEK: ESSAYS ON THE FOUR GOSPEL PASSION NARRATIVES, by Raymond E. Brown. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1989. Paper, 72 pages.

An eminent biblical scholar reflects on the four Passion narratives. His strong pastoral interests come through these very readable essays. Good for preachers. Also good for those who want to do some meditative reading during Holy Week.

QUOTABLE

“Tell me a fact and I’ll learn, tell me a truth and I’ll believe, tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.” (Ed Sabol, NFL Films)

JUSTICE NOTES

"He emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness;" (Philippians 2:6-11))

The Lenten Stations of the Cross offer a rich opportunity to recognize Jesus, suffering today in our world. Many of our brothers and sisters walk the way of the Cross continuing the suffering of Jesus in their lives. We are all called to be the Simons of Cyrene or Veronicas today, knowing that what we lovingly do for each other, we truly do to Him.

1st Station - Pilate Condemns Jesus to Death

Pray for those on death row and work to end to death penalty.

2nd Station - Jesus Takes Up His cross

Encourage a family member, or friend who is suffering.

3rd Station - Jesus Falls the First Time

Prepare a meal for someone who is ill or homeless.

4th Station - Jesus Meets His Mother

Lend a listening ear to a friend in need.

5th Station - Simon Helps Jesus Carry His Cross

Make a contribution of time or money to a parish ministry.

6th Station - Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus

Volunteer your time at a food bank, soup kitchen.

7th Station - Jesus Falls a Second time

Offer respect to those who do minimum wage jobs.

8th Station - Jesus Talks with the Women

Offer assistance to a single parent, or visit an elderly neighbor.

9th Station - Jesus Falls a Third Time

Pray for families and victims of HIV/AIDS.

10th Station - Jesus Is Stripped of His Garments

Boycott businesses that use sweatshop labor to manufacture clothing.

11th Station - Jesus Is Nailed to the Cross

Write to legislators in Congress to ban land mines and other weapons which target civilians.

12th Station - Jesus Dies on the Cross

Pray for the victims of violence. Pray for those who do violence. Pray for those who support violence.

13th Station - Jesus Is Placed in the Arms of His Mother

Turn off your television when violent shows come on.

14th Station - Jesus Is Laid in the Tomb

Visit someone who is home-bound or in a nursing home.

*"We adore you Oh Christ and we bless you,
because by Your holy cross, you have redeemed the world."*

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

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:.....

William Gregory #0156529 (On death row since 8/15/94)

Le Roy Mc Neil #0275780 (11/15/96)

Gary A. Trull #0412440 (11/19/96)

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available:

“First Impressions Preaching Reflections: Liturgical Year C.” Begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

“Liturgical Years A, B and C.” Reflections on the three-year cycle, with **Year C** updated.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the “First Impressions” CD link on the left.

2. **“Homilias Dominicales”** —These Spanish reflections on the Sunday and daily scriptures are written by Dominican sisters and friars. If you or a friend would like to receive these reflections drop a note to fr. John Boll, O.P. at Jboll@opsouth.org Or jboll@preacherexchange.org

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews, daily homilies and other material pertinent to preaching.

4. “First Impressions” is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Dominican Friars of Raleigh, N.C. If you would like “First Impressions” sent weekly to a friend, send a note to fr. John Boll, OP 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 payable to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://preacherexchange.com/donations.htm>

Thanks you and blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
P.O. 12927 Raleigh, N.C. 27605 (919-833-1893, ex 224)

judeop@Juno.com