

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 13th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -C-

I Kings 19: 16, 19-21 Galatians 5: 1, 13-18 Luke 9: 51-62

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Today's Gospel passage marks a turning point in Luke. After Jesus' popular ministry in his native Galilee region, Luke tells us that he "resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem." A travel narrative now begins, it is a large section in Luke's gospel (9:51-19-27) and it will end in the place where Jesus meets his suffering and death. So, today's passage is a crucial moment in Jesus' ministry, and it begins a series of teachings on the nature of discipleship. Jerusalem is not just another city, another place to preach and cure. Jesus knew that we know it and his disciples are about to learn it. What we will be reminded on this journey with Jesus and his disciples, is that following Jesus is not just a casual decision, one of many we make in our life time. Luke is setting out to show us we must make careful consideration of the costs and unwavering commitment that following Jesus requires.

First, Jesus passes through a Samaritan village. Luke links their rejection with the fact the "the destination of his journey was Jerusalem." Maybe they reject Jesus because the Samaritans want Jesus to go to their own Mount Gerizim and not to Mount Zion, the Jewish place of worship. Or maybe Luke is suggesting we must be prepared to accept the costs of following Jesus, and it is the suffering that comes with discipleship that is the reason the world rejects Jesus. He is very much admired in our world. Jesus makes a lovely religious icon; his cross is worn as a piece of jewelry—but he wants more than admiration from a safe distance.

Life is frequently described as a journey—it has a beginning, an end and along the way there are important stopping-off places with countless vistas. The difference for us Christians, however, is that it is more than a journey, it is a pilgrimage. We are like pilgrims of old, traveling together towards a special place, praying as we go and supporting one another as we face the challenges along the way. Jerusalem is the backdrop for Jesus' journey. He keeps Jerusalem always in his mind's eye. Jesus is single-minded, he has a task to accomplish, and we will all be the beneficiaries. Jesus makes it quite clear along the way that to follow him is to be willing to journey whole heartedly with him to Jerusalem. No compromises, no half measures.

The somber words to the potential disciples in today's reading tell them and us that they must join his single-minded determination. The first is reminded that following Jesus has its own insecurities, even homelessness. The second is told that there is even a higher loyalty than filial responsibilities. Let the spiritually dead deal with their dead. And to the third, who wants to go say farewell to his family, Jesus says he will tolerate no delays. There is no looking back if you

want to plow a straight line. Jesus is not in the numbers game. Rather than just add numbers to his followers, Jesus wants them to know what they are getting into if they decide to go with him to Jerusalem.

We who count the size of our congregation on a Sunday morning and reckon the success of our ministry by the numbers who show up, are caught short here. Is each of us ready to reaffirm our commitment to Christ when sacrifice and not “success” is the fruit of discipleship? The “Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head,”--- while we allow little of the world’s pain to enter our head and disturb our peace of mind. Do the pictures of the suffering we see each evening on television news ever cause us a restless night? Or even a few minutes less sleep? Are we haunted at night by the distress of others--- enough to rise from our restless pillow determined to do some little bit to change a situation so that others might rest more easily?

Today’s gospel does what the Sermon on the Mount does—makes me feel my inadequacy as a disciple. Who among us hasn’t looked back? Or, made a choice for our own profit, rather than accept the sacrifice of discipleship? Who hasn’t kept quiet when we should have spoken up, so that we can continue to fit in comfortably with our peers? We have acquiesced rather than speak up and put ourselves on the line. Thankfully we have this eucharist, the meal of recommitment. Gathered with other followers around the table, we hear the words that rebuild the crumbling structure, patch the cracks and freshen up the paint of our discipleship. We eat the meal that knits us more closely into a community that has heard the invitation to follow, considered the costs and still says “yes”; even if it is a fragile “yes,” timidly whispered rather than shouted confidently.

In the first reading, Elisha completely destroys his past to follow the prophet Elijah and to respond to God's call. He kills the yoke of oxen and uses the plowing equipment to provide fuel to cook them. To follow a new way of life he puts behind him all his old ways of living to accept a new way in the relationship with the prophet Elijah. Does it suggest that one has to make a clean break when one decides that God is inviting us to change or to enter into a more profound commitment?

Society extolls ways of violence and aggression to get our will; "one-up- manship" is congratulated, power is extolled, and high position is the sought-after reward. However, we hear a call to a new community and an entirely new consciousness when we respond to God's call. Elisha's actions suggest that half measures will not do. Sometimes we don't have the luxury of putting off to a more "appropriate time" the changes we need to make. We all can quote stories of people caught short and wanting when struck with sickness or demands on their internal resources. They found they had nothing to draw from when strength, resolve or

integrity were needed.

Elisha hears the call and responds in the midst of his daily life; a very typical place for a call in the Bible. Remember Peter's call while he was washing his nets; Matthew's call came while he was in the toll booth collecting taxes; Moses' while he was tending sheep, etc.? What we do every day is most likely the place of our call as well. The call may be to simplify our lives; cut back on our hectic schedule for the sake of our family; get out of an abusive relationship; quit the gang of kids we hang around with, etc. We here in the United States celebrate Independence Day this week. It's a secular holiday, but it does give us an opportunity to reflect on the slavery and addictions that keep us from being free. Hear the call of independence to more sanity; less violence in our speech and actions; the realization that "having it all", is having nothing at all.

"To follow" and "to serve" in biblical language mean something very specific. These terms infer personal allegiance. We follow someone/serve someone; we enter into personal relationship. In our first reading, Elisha says to Elijah, "I will follow you." In Luke, the potential followers say to Jesus, "I will be your follower." Personal allegiance is what we Christians are about. We don't follow a dogma or creed, but the person of Christ.

We "see" and "hear" what's involved in following Jesus by means of the stories of the Gospel. In today's Gospel we not only hear the invitation to follow, but already hear what's required--total trust and dedication. The follower's relationship to God or Christ is what is stressed. The relationship doesn't enslave us but graces us, frees us--even while we are made totally dedicated. Such dedication is freedom, deliverance from "the yoke of slavery" (2nd. reading, Galatians).

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

Daniel E. Harris, **WE SPEAK THE WORD OF THE LORD: A PRACTICAL PLAN FOR MORE EFFECTIVE PREACHING.** Chicago: Acta Publications, 2001. Paper, 213 pages, \$14.95.

This is a fine guide that covers the basics. The book has detailed guidelines for working with study groups or in a more structured peer-directed continuing education program.

JUSTICE NOTES

Some Christians believe that the church has no legitimate role in political issues. As they put it, "The church should stay out of politics and stick to preaching the gospel. We come to church to

hear about God and how to live as good Catholics. We do not come to church to hear about politics.” The 1971 Synod of Bishops challenges preachers and listeners to reflect on the centrality of justice in an authentic proclamation of the gospel. Preaching, the bishops remind the church, is not simply a matter of an individual’s relationship with God. Justice is a constitutive dimension of preaching:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.

----Daniel Harris, pages 145-146