

First Impressions 16th SUNDAY -C-

Genesis 18: 1-10 Psalm 15: 2-5 Colossians 1: 24-28 Luke 10: 38-42

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Jesus and his disciples continue their journey to Jerusalem. Along the way with them we meet various groups of people: the crowds, who are drawn by their own desperate needs or are curious about the spectacle; the “teachers of the law,” who are growing more and more hostile; Jesus’ disciples, enthusiastic but confused because of Jesus’ talk of his coming passion. Just prior to today’s Martha and Mary story a lawyer “tested” Jesus about who constituted “neighbor,” and last week we heard Jesus’ response in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Have Jesus’ followers and antagonists really been listening to what he has been saying? Have we? Today we have a story of someone who shows respect for Jesus and sets an example for us by listening to his word.

The Martha and Mary account is only found in Luke and so we would expect to find in it and the surrounding ones, typical Lucan touches. For example, typical of Luke, it features women ministering and listening to Jesus. Also, the story is situated between action and prayer: the preceding story of the Good Samaritan encapsulates the ideal of Christian love and service; while the following account after the Martha and Mary one, has some of Jesus’ teaching about prayer. Are we listening to the cumulated message of these narratives? Does it take prayer to help us discern and follow-through on our call to serve others in need? Will prayer help us recognize the needy so that we not “walk on by on the other side,” as the religious leaders did to the man who had been set upon by bandits? The stories of the Good Samaritan, Mary and Martha and the teaching on prayer are intimately related--- they are of a piece.

What a relief it must have been for Jesus to be “welcomed” by Martha. This is Martha’s only appearance in Luke. Martha’s sister Mary is also in the story, and she sits at Jesus’ feet to hear him speak—literally, to “listen to his word.” To sit at someone’s feet was to acknowledge his or her authority. Thus, Mary treats Jesus as one sent with an authoritative word, a prophet. Martha is often described as “the heavy” in this story—the one who is fretting and bossy. But initially, at least, she is the hospitable one who welcomes Jesus and tries to do much to follow-up on her hospitality. Since Jesus is journeying to Jerusalem with his disciples, I wonder if they weren’t close by. If so, Martha had much to do and could be overwhelmed with work and feel abandoned by her sister.

Jesus tells Martha that she is “anxious and worried” about many things. Luke Timothy Johnson

(SACRA PAGINA, page 174, cf. below) says that in the original these terms suggest: being “anxious” about the entanglements of life in the world and “making an uproar.” Johnson goes on to say that Jesus’ response, “there is a need for only one thing,” had been variously interpreted. Some say Jesus is suggesting she could have served fewer dishes, just “one” of a “few.” But Johnson thinks Jesus is responding to the virtue of hospitality, that is, the importance of paying attention to the guest. That’s what’s important. Everything else is secondary. So, Mary made the right choice. Mary’s way of being hospitable was not only to welcome the Prophet in their home but to also listen to his words. She has done what people should do—listen to the one who speaks God’s word---“the one thing necessary.”

Which makes us ask ourselves: how do we offer hospitality to the prophets? How open are we to hearing from the “guests” among us, our God speaking to us? A guest comes from the outside world. They bring us a presence and a perspective we don’t ordinarily get because we are immersed in our daily routine, companions and usual thought patterns. When someone speaks from a different world view, or another perspective on daily life, our first response is to put up barriers; we feel our borders threatened. It is an act of faith and trust in the Spirit within us to pay attention to what we hear and see and to reflect on it. We can sit at Jesus’ feet and listen to his words just by being more attentive to those around us; especially those who are from the “outside,” who initially act and speak in ways foreign to us. Before we bolt the door of our minds and hearts, we might practice hospitality and openness. Who knows what we might hear? Who knows what riches we might experience? Who knows, we might even be welcoming the Prophet---the one sent by God with a word for us disciples.

Today we begin a three-part series from the Letter to the Colossians. Preachers may want to preach at least once from this second reading during the next weeks. This letter presents Christ in cosmic proportions and proposes to his followers how we can respond to him in faith. Colossians teaches that Christ is our source of redemption and in him we are set free from subservience to other powers and ascetical teachings. Since Christ has set us free, the author of Colossians tells us (we are not sure whether Paul or one of his disciples wrote this letter), we are to give thanks to God for this freedom and use it to serve others.

Today’s selection from Colossians can be confusing to people who hear Paul say that his suffering is “filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body which is the church.” How strange... and what is “lacking in the afflictions of Christ?” The author is reminding Christian ministers that we continue to experience what Christ did before his resurrection—we are suffering for the church. Our suffering is “on behalf of his body.” Why this suffering? So that we can bring to completion the proclamation of the Word of God.

God's Word is made "intelligible," or understood by those who have not yet heard it, by the witness of Christ's ministers. Our willingness to make personal sacrifice for the gospel and, even like Paul, to "rejoice in my suffering," becomes a proclamation of the gospel through our lives. He tells us that God's Word was a "mystery hidden from ages and from generations past." But now it is revealed by the lives of "the holy ones." By their lives and sufferings "the holy ones" reveal Christ himself. Paul is willing to "rejoice" in his sufferings because he believes he is serving Christ's body. Evil forces in the world still exert their power over us, but those who live in Christ's sacrificial spirit can overcome evil and extend the work of Christ's reconciliation to others. How will Christ's reign be made known throughout the world? By Christ's followers who are empowered to live by his Spirit.

It has never been easy being a Christian in our world: not in Paul's time; not in ours. If we are faithful and living Christ's life, then we must make daily choices that set us against the grain of our contemporaries. Friction and sometimes conflict are the result—and they are painful. Colossians reminds us that any suffering—material, physical or spiritual—we endure for Christ is not in vain. Rather, it contributes to spreading the Good News of Christ to those around us. Are we all preachers? No, not all of us will climb into the pulpit this weekend to preach. But Paul reminds us that the message of the gospel is proclaimed through each baptized person who faithfully lives out the sacrifices gospel living requires.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Luke Timothy Johnson, *SACRA PAGINA: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. Editor. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991. ISBN 0-8146-5805-9

This commentary is part of a series (*SACRA PAGINA*) of new translations and expositions of the New Testament books by Catholic scholars. It is meant for biblical professionals, theological students, clergy and religious educators. Preachers and those who teach bible classes in parishes will find this an excellent and helpful series.

QUOTABLE

One cannot read these stories without appreciating Luke's deftness and skill. They stay as fresh for readers thousands of years after their composition, resisting even bad translations. It is obvious that Luke understands something about human psychology. The pattern of avoidance exhibited by the priest and Levite, the self-justifying bluster of the lawyer, the irritation of the "dutiful daughter" Martha. These are people like us. Less familiar perhaps is what goes beyond psychology into gospel: the compassion that is not simply a feeling but translates itself into the self-giving that takes risks, that disposes of the self and one's possessions and then allows the other to leave without clinging; the hospitality that receives the other as the other wishes to be received, that listens.

---- Luke Timothy Johnson's comments on Luke 10: 25-42, page 176.

JUSTICE NOTES

Justice is not a case of the "haves" giving to the "have nots." That is far too unworthy and shallow an interpretation of God's intent for us.

We must recognize that we are all members of God's family. We would want the best for our family. We would want good education and health care for them and would willingly help in any way possible for that to happen.

----Archbishop Desmond Tutu

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty – not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners – to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person.

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

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:.....

- Timmy Grooms #0158506 (On death row since 4/24/98)
- Tilmon Golphin #0590940 (5/13/98)
- Gary Greene #0155512 (6/1/98)

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