

**“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 17<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY -C-**

Genesis 18: 20-32    Psalm 138    Colossians 2: 12-14    Luke 11: 1-13

*By: Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

What kind of God did our Jewish ancestors believe in, allowing a mere mortal, though a special one like Abraham, to “talk God down” from God’s original plans? How could this puny human attempt to change God’s mind about destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, cities synonymous to this day with sinful excess? What presumption on Abraham’s part thinking he could turn away God’s angry hand! Were our Jewish ancestors chuckling as they told this story of the conversation between God and Abraham? Were they bragging and admiring the brashness of their ancestor in faith? ----“Our father Abraham bargained with the Almighty to get God to show mercy on the heathen.”

Actually, weren’t they really telling a story about their God as they depicted God and Abraham like a merchant and a customer haggling in a market over the price for some precious article? “Will you take fifty... how about 45...suppose 30...ten?” And if God is the one whose “merchandise” is being haggled over, why does God let Abraham win the bargaining at such a low amount?” “Suppose ten are found?”

Maybe God “loses” the bargaining because the humans of Sodom and Gomorrah, sinful as they were, are of even more concern to God than they are to Abraham bargaining on their behalf. God seems to want to lose this debate; God is ready and willing to give in to Abraham’s haggling, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy.” Our ancestors not only chuckled as they told this story, their jaws must have dropped in awe... “What a God we have, so ready to be merciful to the entire population of two cities for the sake of a few!” This is the God the Jews worship in awe and reverence, with passionate commitment and trust, the God of mercy whose ear is turned towards those who address God. At today’s eucharist we might let our jaws drop too, as we worship our merciful God in awe and gratitude.

Note that Abraham isn’t asking God for time for the innocent to escape; but to spare the entire population because of the innocent. What kind of math is this—10 good ones can counterbalance all the evil of the rest? What boldness on Abraham’s part, on what logical footing does he stand? On what grounds does he plead his case? He bases his argument on God’s very identity, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” That’s not our sense of “quid pro quo” justice is it? This “Judge of all the earth” looks and sounds like mercy to me. This isn’t a story about justice as humans might mete it out; this is about the holy One whose

mercy is beyond our reckoning, outside our usual accounting systems—this is divine mercy. So, let God act justly, we are the beneficiaries!

Both the faithful hearer and the sinner who has strayed afar, can embrace this story. All of us are encouraged by it to pray boldly for mercy, while not worrying about the proper or ceremonially correct wording of our prayers. This story says, “Speak up, be bold, even outrageous, God is listening and ready to engage you.” So often the “Old Testament God” is stereotyped as harsh, “on high,” distant from us creatures. But Abraham’s God is an intimate God who comes close to engage the petitioner, enter into dialogue and lend a sympathetic ear. The reading matches well with the theology of Luke’s gospel where the God of prayer and mercy is a key Player.

As he travels to Jerusalem, Jesus has been instructing his disciples. We have heard about the sacrifices he asks from them. He is forming them in a total love of God, teaching them to listen to the Word and then act on it. (Remember last week’s Mary and Martha passage, and the Good Samaritan the week before?) Today we focus on prayer. If Abraham could pray even for Sodom and Gomorrah, is there anything, any land, religion, nation or people we should give up on? Who are we to draw the final line of judgment—“I will go no further...I give up on them/you” —when God is so “pliable” and patient? Like Abraham, Luke’s parable of the persistent friend encourages perseverance, daring and confidence in our prayer. After all, we are told, the One inside is a “friend”, so keep knocking, even if initially there seems to be no response or we feel we are being ignored.

Prayer is a theme that runs through all of Luke. Besides Jesus’ teachings about prayer, as we see today, Luke shows Jesus himself frequently at prayer. Throughout this gospel we find Jesus praying at crucial moments in his ministry (e.g. 3:12, 6:12; 8:18, 9:28 etc.). We learn from Jesus that we must be most regular in prayer, for prayer acknowledges our dependence on our “Abba” (the special term of endearment Jesus uses to name our Parent-God) in the present and for our future.

The preacher need not feel obliged to address today’s gospel as if it were one unit. Judging from the other gospels, the teachings on prayer were disparate units that Luke assembled in this one place. So, for the sake of simplicity and clarity, I would focus my preaching on one of the elements in the story: choose from the “Lord’s Prayer,” the parable about prayer, or the brief teachings at the end of the passage.

If you choose to preach from the “Lord’s Prayer,” you will notice it’s communal nature. It is a “we” prayer—“Give us,” “forgive us” and “subject us not to the trial.” A community that is

anxiously waiting for the Lord's return is praying this prayer. As we pray it together we stay faithful and "persistent" in our prayerful discipline, as Jesus suggests. Amid trials and temptations, we are trying to "hang in there". While our church seems even more frail and fault-ridden than ever, we struggle to have faith that the Lord is still in our midst, has not given up on us and will return one day. In this community prayer, together we pray that we will not give in to "the trial," not wear out or become luke-warm during severe testing and our long wait for Christ to return.

The request, "Give us each day our daily bread," is a prayer of the poor. The poor are important throughout Luke's gospel. The poor, who respond to the Lord in their daily lives, depend on God for each day's sustenance. But this is also an awakening prayer for a community, a community that is called to share all things in common; if that were done, such a community would have no poor. The preacher might address the hungers of the people around us and how we can respond and share with them.

At this time, our national response to the poor who cry out for daily bread is not good. Benefits have been cut back, the number of homeless people is on the rise. "Give us this day our daily bread." We hear the poor crying out to God for help that we as a nation and as a Christian community should do something about. While the economy is again thriving for part of our society, the bishops of North Carolina note that, "we are still haunted by how the least among us are faring. There is too much poverty and too little economic opportunity for all our citizens. Our faith tradition as Catholics calls us to put the needs of the poor and the vulnerable before all else. In our job-oriented economy, this tradition is expressed in the security of gainful employment."

We also pray for the daily bread we need to respond "each day" to Jesus' invitation to take up the cross of discipleship (9:23) and follow him—denying self to follow in his way of life. We are keenly aware that we need day-by-day bread to be faithful disciples. We meet challenges daily on our path and each day requires a new nourishment. We need the Eucharist today in a different way and for different needs than when we last came to this table. Today we find ourselves reaching out for bread that will keep us from fainting on the way. Together we pause on the road Jesus walks with us, and we come forward with outstretched hands to receive strengthening food, a food that also deepens our joy and gives us reason to celebrate Eucharist.

The prayer is for "daily bread." It is a prayer for an important but simple and basic form of nourishment. What do we find ourselves hungering for in our first world society? We have ravenous hungers and are seldom satisfied, even though we have obscene excesses of food and stuff. To pray for daily bread from our heavenly Parent's hand is to acknowledge that we are

dependent to our core on God's care, for the true essentials of life that we can't provide for ourselves. To pray for today's bread and to recognize that it is the bread of true satisfaction is also to pray that we will be able to put aside all we clutch to that is not life giving. In so many ways, through wealth and power we try to satisfy deep hungers that only God can fill. We pray then that the food we receive at this Eucharist will help us get our priorities straight; will help us let go what is extraneous, superficial or just harmful to the Christ-life in us. With our hands empty, we will have more capacity for the "daily bread" we receive today that will not fade or be lost, no matter what "trial" we experience.

### **QUOTABLE**

Elie Weisel tells this story from the Jewish Diaspora: "Do you know who revoked the heavenly decree that would have let loose a catastrophe on our people?" asked the Baal-Shem of Rabbi Nahman of Horodenko. "I will tell you. Our litanies, our fasts had no effect. It was a woman who saved us. See how it happened. She went to the synagogue and began weeping and praying: 'Master of the universe, are you not our father? Why do you not hear your children when they cry to you? Look at me; I am a mother; I have five children. And when they shed one tear, my heart is broken. But you, Father, have so many more All people are your children. And they cry. Even if your heart is of stone, how can you be insensible to it?' And God," concluded the Besht, "decided in her favor."

### **JUSTICE NOTES**

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

Our Church is also working to heal wounds. Our community of faith and especially we, as bishops, are working to face our responsibility and take all necessary steps to overcome the hurt, damage, and loss of trust resulting from the evil of clerical sexual abuse. While working to protect children and rebuild trust, we must not abandon the Church's important role in public life and the duty to encourage Catholics to act on our faith in political life.

These times and this election will test us as American Catholics. A renewed commitment to faithful citizenship can help heal the wounds of our nation, world, and Church. What we have endured has changed many things, but it has not changed the fundamental mission and message of Catholics in public life. In times of terror and war, of global insecurity and economic uncertainty, of disrespect for human life and human dignity, we need to return to basic moral principles. Politics cannot be merely about ideological conflict, the search for partisan

advantage, or political contributions. It should be about fundamental moral choices. How do we protect human life and dignity? How do we fairly share the blessings and burdens of the challenges we face? What kind of nation do we want to be? What kind of world do we want to shape?

Politics in this election year and beyond should be about an old idea with new power--the common good. The central question should not be, "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" It should be, "How can 'we'--all of us, especially the weak and vulnerable--be better off in the years ahead? How can we protect and promote human life and dignity? How can we pursue greater justice and peace?"

----US Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility," page 1.

### **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 and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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:.....

- Alden Hardin #0166056 (On death row since 8/12/94)
- Michael L. Fullwood #0138201 (8/19/94)
- Phillip Wilkinson #0438643 (9/15/94)

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