

First Impressions 19th SUNDAY -C-

Wisdom 18: 6-9 Psalm 33 Hebrews 11: 1-2, 8-19 Luke 12: 32-48

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Today's gospel is long; it consists of three segments of sayings by Jesus to his disciples. Normally I am loathe to take the option of the shorter version offered by the Lectionary, especially when the shorter passage chops up a good story. But since today we have a long series of instructions and parables, I choose to reflect on the short version and to preach from it (12:32-40).

The gospel sounds out of place. It is mid-August, and the reading has Advent overtones, with its talk of being prepared, watchfulness, guarding the house, lighting a lamp, etc. The liturgical year has many facets, and each season helps us focus on certain aspects of our Christian lives: Advent on hope, longing and expectation; Lent on renewal, repentance and forgiveness, etc. But we are reminded today that throughout the year, not just in Advent, we are to keep vigilant and anticipate the in-breaking of the Lord into our daily lives. We also order our priorities with the awareness that the present is not all there is; we must live our lives in the light of Jesus' return. We keep our lamps burning because we will have to work long into the night and we don't want to miss him when at last he does come.

Advent does speak a lot about the end times, but today we are also cautioned that Christ can come at any moment; can break through our fixed patterns and limited expectations and surprise us with new possibilities. What has seemed like a dead end in our lives can break open and reveal a way through the broken and lifeless places to new life. Or, when we thought we just couldn't go on and lacked even the desire to try again, we might hear the knock on the door announcing the unexpected return of the master who has finally arrived to give us what we need to continue being his vigilant servants. Our Eucharist today is that food and drink specially prepared by the attentive Shepherd who calls us his "little flock." Here we "recline at table," we stop our fretting and worry, and we are served by our host with a more-than ample feast.

How do we know that, while we are struggling to respond to difficult situations that severely test us, Christ is standing with us? It doesn't always feel that way. The second reading from Hebrews invites us to reflect on Abraham as an example of someone who trusted God in an impossible situation. He believed even when, from all appearances, there seemed to be no way God was going to be faithful to him. If he relied only on what he could see and what his reasoning could tell him, he might as well have given up on God. But his unyielding faith kept

him strong. He had a lamp of faith burning through the dark night of testing and doubt. That's the kind of faith Jesus invites us into when he says, "Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom."

It sounds like Jesus is addressing frightened disciples—then and now. "Do not be afraid *any longer....*" We certainly can make a list of what frightens us, as individuals and as a struggling church. When we are frightened by events and feel we are facing them alone, we listen to Jesus' voice. Can you hear his tenderness as he speaks to his "little folk?" He is the Shepherd who walks with us through "the dark valley." He is, as promised in the 23rd Psalm, the one who will lead us "beside restful water." He reassures us that we have been given the gift that surpasses all others, "Your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom."

That's the good news that Jesus announces before he calls his disciples to: disengage from reliance on material supports; work serving God diligently and keep hope alive by watching for the return of the Son of Man. Even though he may not come quickly, he advises us to light a lamp in the darkness and stay ready.

The disciples need to listen to Jesus because he and they are on their journey to Jerusalem. He has been telling them what to expect and certainly, when they get to Jerusalem, they will experience a lot there to frighten them. When bad things happen to us, or when following Jesus causes opposition and revilement, then we are liable to shift our attention off Jesus, lose faith in his accompanying Spirit and become fixed on the troubles at hand. That is why he encourages us in these sayings and parables today to stay watchful, faithful and prepared.

What might he mean when Jesus says, "...your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom?" Jesus is reminding us that God has seen our need and come to our aid. That's why we don't have to be afraid. God has always done that for the chosen people—been their Shepherd. Jesus has chosen a new people, his disciples. We cannot "earn" entrance into God's presence; rather, God comes to offer us an honored place at the table. Since we are already citizens in God's domain, we resist whatever is against the spirit of God's kingdom and we allow God to use us to work to bring God's rule to earth.

Through Luke's gospel Jesus has been enfleshing in his life how a child of the kingdom of God lives. He has invited the least to join him; welcomed the outsider; fed the hungry; forgiven the sinner; brought wholeness to the broken; given hope to the despondent; resisted violence and returned love; rejected the exclusivity taught by his religious opponents; prayed in simplicity and trust and, in Jerusalem, gave his life in service for others. No one can constantly live the way Jesus did unless we are given the new life of the kingdom: which he assures us it has

pleased God to give us. Once we accept that gift we can respond in ways we never thought imaginable on our own. Grace has been freely given us and so we also give ourselves to others—graciously.

One example of this new life is that we disciples can put aside old dependencies on our “money bag,” and live secure in the faith that our treasure lies with God and no one can steal it from us. Unencumbered by dependence on material things and confident in the life we have been given, we can roll up our sleeves (or, as Jesus would put it, “gird your loins”) and get to work being Jesus’ disciples.

The parable about the faithful servants waiting the master’s return from the wedding doesn’t go as we might expect. We would have expected that when the master eventually returned the vigilant servants would be prepared, open the door for him, sit him at table and wait on him. After all, he is the master. Instead, the returning master has the servants sit at table and, surprise of surprises, he waits on them! We have nothing to fear from this master for he holds back nothing. Which is what Jesus does. When he and his disciples arrive in Jerusalem, his love for them will take him to his death.

Today we are gathered at the eucharistic table. We are the night owls, the ones working hard day and night and we need a refreshment that only God can give us. And God does. God waits on us at this table and feeds our weary spirits with good food and drink, the very best--- Jesus Christ himself. Once we have received what we need, we can return to the work we have been doing and want to keep on doing for Christ—fulfilling our roles as members of the kingdom God has graciously given us, Christ’s “little flock.”

QUOTABLE

Are we to dispel this ignorance of the scriptures by school or sermon, class or Mass? Both, of course. But don’t confuse the two. If we understood the power of the Word studied, proclaimed, and believed, we would not be running to new schemas to “cover Catholic doctrine,” giving a “homily” on sacramentals or Catholic burial practices, giving up on the advances in understanding the scripture that have been made in the past thirty years.

---Joseph T. Nolan in, *THE WORLD, THE CHURCH AND PREACHING: THE BEST OF GOOD NEWS COMMENTARY*. New Berlin, Wisconsin: Liturgical Publications Inc, 1996, (Page 101).

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Blount, Brian K. (General Editor). TRUE TO OUR NATIVE LAND: AN AFRICAN AMERICAN NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. Associate Editors: Cain Hope Felder, Clarice J. Martin, and Emerson B. Powery.

This pathfinding commentary is highly recommended for those preaching in the African American Catholic community. Features commentaries on each New Testament book plus essays on such topics as Womanist Biblical interpretation, African American preaching, African imagery in the Bible, and African American art as an interpretative lens. Recovers historic exegesis of New Testament texts by the African diaspora's sermons and spirituals. Illustrations including many works by Henry Ossawa Turner (1859-1937) as well as Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden and William H. Johnson. Also, ancient icons of early Christians and artifacts from African traditional religion. An appendix lists African American New Testament scholars holding doctorates – half of whom have contributed to this volume.
– Bruce B. Schultz, O.P., Pastor, Holy Redeemer, San Antonio, TX

JUSTICE NOTES

Sell your belongings and give alms...for where your treasure is, there also will your heart be". (Luke 12:32-33)

"It is the bread of the hungry you are hoarding, the clothes of the naked that hang in your wardrobe, the shoes of those who go barefoot that fall to pieces in your house, the money of the poor that you possess and do not use. You commit as many injustices as there are things you could give away." (*St. Basil the Great*)

THE DANGERS OF "STUFF"

"I have so much stuff—stuff that consumes me, consumes my time, and consumes my energy! As I've struggled in my faith journey with what to buy, how much to pay for it, and where to store it, I've come to realize that "stuff" may not be a gift to enjoy but an obsession that begins to become all-consuming. The day becomes ordered around time to clean, store, maintain, update, paint, repair, and on and on. Once I buy a new computer (which I find extremely useful), I begin to wonder if I need a Blackberry, a new desk, or a new monitor. More of my time is needed to complete the fulfillment of the "purchase". There is no end in sight!

Our consumerism can begin to become a god. I ask myself if I have I bought in to a God of Scarcity (promoted by all the ads in our media and print) rather than the God of Abundant Life, the One who offers good gifts with no strings attached. I must put aside the messages of mass

media and invest more time with the poor and the oppressed, with Biblical reflection and faith-filled people, in order to reorient my thinking and maintain my pursuit of justice and faithful living. My goals have changed. I will turn off the TV, cancel the worldly magazines, refuse to look at so many ads, and stop going to the mall unless I have a “real” need. I am trying to focus less on the missing merchandise in my life and reorient myself toward Godly pursuits. It’s not always easy, but it is making a difference. I find myself much more thankful for the abundance with which I have been blessed.” (Sandy Irving, Board Member North Carolina Council of Churches)

Did you know?

- For an additional **\$13 billion** each year, basic nutrition and health care needs could be met around the world.
- Americans spend **\$33 billion** in weight loss products and services each year and **\$12 billion** yearly on video rentals.
- America has spent over **400 billion** on the Iraq War.

What Can I do?

- Read the Gospel with an open heart and mind.
- Find ways to simplify your life so that you have more time for relationships with God and with people and spend less time “relating” to things.

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

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:.....

- Ted Prevatte #0330166 (On death row since 2/22/99)
- Raymond Thibodeaux #0515143 (3/2/99)
- Lyle May #0580028 (3/18/99)

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