

**“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 19<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -C-**

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

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Dear Preachers:

Prenote: Roman Catholics celebrate the feast of the Assumption this week, at the end of these reflections I have added a few notes that I think will be helpful for our preaching on that day.

Bear with me for a moment, for we need to pay extra attention to the structure of today's gospel. This will help our preparation strategy and may simplify our message. Today's lectionary selection is more complex than in previous weeks and is a preaching challenge. This week we don't have a neat, focused package, for example, a parable or a miracle story. Instead, the passage is in pieces. The first section (vv. 32-34) carries over and concludes a previous discussion in Luke on possessions. We heard part of it in last Sunday's parable of the rich fool and his greed (12:13-21). The section right after that is about anxiety and possessions, but we skipped over it in the lectionary's Sunday sequence. It concludes with the first three verses of today's reading. After these opening verses, the focus shifts to the teaching on preparedness and Jesus' return. You may want to preach on just the opening verses or take the option and focus on the second part given in the shorter Gospel reading, (12: 35-40) which leaves out these opening verses.

Remember the context. Jesus has already said that he does not want us preoccupied by fear and anxiety in fulfilling our daily needs. While the world presumes that possessions can guarantee us a secure future, Jesus says such concerns will not really help in daily life, will not “add a moment to our life span” (v. 25). God cares for the needy and will provide for them. But how? Are we being unrealistic and naive expecting God to take care of those in need? No, because we are a community. We live in a life-partnership and those who have must provide not only for themselves, but for those who have not. So, in the opening of today's selection we are asked to sell our belongings and give alms. (As Raymond Brown comments, “Sell your possessions and give alms is very Lucan in its outlook.”) God helps others through the care we give to one another. We also live in a God-partnership. With our sights set on God's reign, which is a gift to us from a gracious God, other needs should fall into place. We, in the meantime, must realize that our true treasure is within, where lies the “inexhaustible treasure that no thief can reach, nor moth destroy.”

The second part of today's passage, beginning with verse 35, has to do with being prepared for the Lord's coming. Recall where we are at this moment of Luke's gospel. Beginning with 9:51, Jesus has turned his face to Jerusalem where he will be crushed by evil. This decision is now

directing the narrative and enters in some way into moments along the road to Jerusalem. Luke's community needed to be reminded: though Jesus seems to be gone and things were going poorly for his community, nevertheless, he is with us now and he will return. This reminder is important. If the disciple were to look around at the world, with all its ambiguities and outright injustices and suffering, one might ask, "Who's in charge here anyway?" Based on today's passage, Jesus would invite us to believe that our present and future destiny are in our loving Parent's ("Your Father's") hands. This parental God is gifting the "little flock" with the fullest life, the really essential life, the "reign of God." ("Your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.")

The first disciples were mired in the present moment. Most were poor. Like their contemporaries, they were living from day to day in a harsh world. (The cruel treatment of the servant in charge in the parable gives the reader a sense of the harsh realities of the world in which Jesus lived and from which he drew his stories.) And they were suffering. They may have been so absorbed in their present distress that they couldn't look up to envision anything different in their future. Believing in Jesus' return would help put daily life in perspective. The community faced daily struggle, persecution and the passing of its members, without seeing the victory of their faith. Nevertheless, Luke is telling them that the Lord will return. In the light of this hope, early Christians could look at their lives through the lens of expectation. He will come again.

If that is so, the seeming victories in modern society, especially in the first world, its pride, accomplishments and privileges for the few, are illusionary and temporary. The powerful and rich seem triumphant. Nevertheless, the caring community of Jesus is called to be less anxious about its own welfare and more concerned about those in need. The comfortable and the competent are the ones who are really on shaky and insecure footing. For with the Lord's return, their powerful rule will be revealed for the illusion it is. Jesus likens his return to a thief's breaking into a house. It will come as a complete surprise to those not prepared for it, to those living in false security and distracted about other things.

While we wait, we servants have been put in charge, given responsibility. Our gaze isn't distracted by a restless search for more possessions. (Remember the teaching last week on greed?) We realize that what we really need has been given us free of charge. "Don't be afraid any longer little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the reign of God." Freed from anxiety, even the striving we thought we had to do to gain God's pleasure, we can turn our attention elsewhere and tend to the servants' real concern—the care of the household. We attend diligently to those who suffer, are unloved, undergo injustice and who need guidance in learning the ways of God's household. Remembering Jesus' promise to return, also empowers

the disciple in the struggles each of us face. Guided by today's Word, we remember that even defeat is not the last word. It wasn't for Jesus in Jerusalem, and it won't be for us who follow him there.

Are we so worn down by present concerns and stresses that we see little possibilities for the future? We conclude, things are the way they are and little feels like it can change. Can anyone break the cycle of daily routine that makes life such a drudgery? For example, there's the "sandwich generation," overworked parents who are squeezed in the middle by constant concerns for both their children and their elderly parents. A recent study found working mothers as the most stressed members of our society: sleep deprived, trying to balance both home and work schedules. What does this passage of expected return (and relief!) mean to them?... That the daily and necessary labors have meaning.... That the responsibilities that ask fidelity and perseverance are the very tasks that are in accord "with the master's will"—as the parable puts it. We were cautioned previously about greed. But for these struggling servants, greed is not their concern as they try to remain faithful in the "second and third watch" of their stewardship. Not losing hope and seeing what they are doing as a form of discipleship might be more the issue for these hard-working nurturers.

There are other servants, "further on down the road," who also are called to keep vigilance in their discipleship. They are an older generation with different responsibilities, called to discipleship at another stage of their lives. I had dinner recently with a retired couple, with 35 grandchildren. They were still doing what they were doing 5 years ago when last I saw them—being faithful to their Christian calling. They attend church frequently; he is a eucharistic minister, she a lector. They visit a couple of shut-ins, older parishioners who can't get to church too often. He belongs to a meditation group; she presides at weekly communion services. They continue their involvement in social issues: working to get local corporations to clean up groundwater pollution in their neighborhood and trying to close the School of the Americas in Georgia. Regardless of their age, they call themselves "involved disciples." They say they have "widened the tent" of the Lord's work. They don't have to worry about the hour the Lord returns, as the figure has it, they have been faithful for the much that has been entrusted to them.

These parables are not meant to be an escape clause. We cannot shirk our responsibility as disciples with our gaze fixed on some future return of Jesus. "All will be taken care of in the next life." Rather, we are called to tend to what is not well in this life. Jesus' strong reminder that he will return like a thief who catches the householder unprepared, should keep us on our toes, focused on what occupied Jesus' attention while he walked among us: healing the sick, welcoming strangers, eating with outcasts and forgiving wrongs done against us. We cannot

succumb to a dualism that focuses on our destiny with God, while the current distress of the world God created in love goes unaddressed.

### **The Assumption:**

This is a difficult feast to preach. I found some help from Liturgy Training Publication's, "Sourcebook." I'll quote it in full and hope it offers some help, or insights.

"History of the Solemnity: Soon after the council of Ephesus (431) proclaimed Mary to be Theotokos, the Bearer of God, a feast of her "dormition" or death began to spread. Within a few centuries, the church in Rome began observing this feast, which came to be known as the Assumption. At the first National Synod of the American church (1791), the nation was placed under the patronage of Mary with the title of the Assumption. The cathedral of the diocese of Baltimore, at that time the See for the whole country, was given the same name.

In 1950, Pope Pius XII defined the Assumption as dogma. At that time, he listed the benefits that should flow from this proclamation: a stronger piety towards Mary, a more universal conviction on the value of human life devoted to God's will, a repudiation of the materialism that diverts body and soul from their lofty goal, and 'Finally, it is our hope that belief in Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven will make our belief in our own resurrection stronger and render it more effective.'"

The images of the feast reflect its history. In its earliest form, the day focused on the paschal mystery as expressed in the death of Mary. Making her entrance into heaven explicit was the second stage, with language about a triumphal procession, a bridal march and Mary's bodily assumption later added a third layer of texts for the feast.

Liturgy today: Recent history has focused strongly on the bodily assumption of Mary. The readings for the vigil and the day, however, suggest a stronger focus on Mary's share in the paschal mystery, and on our own share in the same mystery. Planners might review the goals of Pius XII. Have our parish observances of this feast fostered a stronger belief in our own resurrection?"