

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 20th SUNDAY -C-
Jeremiah 38: 4-6, 8-10 Hebrews 12: 1-4 Luke 12: 49-53
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I will be focusing on the Gospel for this reflection with some allusions to the other two readings. The Gospel attracts my attention because it must be one of the hardest to hear in the New Testament. “I have come for division,” Jesus tells us. This isn’t the Jesus of the plaster statues or the sappy gaze of pious paintings, is it? He says he wants to start a fire on the earth, and he is impatient to get the blaze going. It doesn’t even sound like the Jesus whose birth the angels herald as bringing peace (2:14).

Jesus goes further. He will cause, he says, division in families. Earlier in this Gospel (8: 19-21), Jesus described his new family as those who hear the Word of God and act on it. Jesus has ignited people with a desire to follow him and form a new kind of family. This was serious business to the strict Mediterranean family structure of Jesus’ society. (Did your family have expressions like mine—“Blood is thicker than water.”?) Everyone knew their place, and one stayed in that place within both family and society. For Jesus’ contemporaries, to leave family would be leaving one’s life behind, being cut off from inheritance, influence and family protection in old age and care in case of illness. Joining such a “disreputable band” as Jesus’, would endanger all the relations one had with family and the larger family formed through marriage—notice his allusion to in-laws.

Our religion here in America is domesticated. Religious leaders are invited to pray at business luncheons, school assemblies and the opening of legislative bodies. But we would not be so welcome were we to speak about unethical business practices, discriminatory school districts and unjust laws. To do so would certainly cause division and cut us off from families and the alliances (“in-laws”) we have made and cultivated. I would rather be the peaceful preacher than the one who divides “three against two and two against three.” What congregation would want to hear these words, especially in the midst of the “hazy, lazy days of summer”? We would rather have Jesus the peacemaker than the disturber of the peace. He has entered a crowded place and yelled “Fire!” If it were a false alarm we would have him arrested. But he yells the truth for those who would listen.

In chapter 12, Jesus has been speaking of the time of his coming as a crisis time, a time of intense preparation. He accuses the crowds of not knowing what time it is and tells them about his own destiny and the destiny of anyone wishing to follow him. There is passion in this Jesus; notice the exclamation points that end his opening statements. His presence and the call to

follow him provoke a crisis in his hearers, a division of opinion, a separation in families and among friends.

In fact, divisions caused by joining Jesus' band of followers, his new family, seem inevitable. They are not just an occasional inconvenience for them but seem to constitute their very vocation as his followers. If God's ways, as enfleshed in the words and actions of Jesus, are followed, conflicts will result—no getting around it!

So what about the peace that is supposed to come with the presence of Jesus? There will be peace, but it will not come quickly or easily, but at great cost. Jesus has been telling his followers that they will receive the same treatment he did. This should not come as a surprise to those of us who have experienced how entrenched sin is in our culture. We worship pagan gods, leaving gifts at the altars of materialism, racism, sexism, etc. As wealthy as our nation is these days, we still give proportionately less to nations in need than most of the other industrialized nations do. We spend more on ourselves; save and give less. As a church we give much to the needy but rare are the voices among us that challenge unjust structures both within our nation and within our own church.

Jesus is no starry-eyed dreamer. He knows the power of sin and has suffered under its cruel punishment. His followers, when they speak with his voice and authority, should not expect less. The "baptism" he must undergo is the death he will endure because he has spoken out against the sinful structures of the world in which he lived. If he continues the path he is following, he will not be able to escape the death awaiting him. He does not sound like he wants to, in fact, his words today tell us he yearns for it. If he is to accomplish the work God has for him, his death is inevitable. Unless he changes his message; and this he will not do. Like Jeremiah in our first reading, Jesus suffers the fate of those who stay faithful to the task appointed them by God.

The disciple has responded to the initial call to follow Jesus. Now we hear his stark reminder of what the costs of discipleship will be. But we have entered a new family, we are not alone. The letter to the Hebrews describes this family as a "cloud of witnesses." We have the example of the holy ones who have preceded us. Their lives and the perseverance they exhibited under great difficulties give us the example and the courage to live out our commitments today. We do not just have to look backwards to find such a "cloud of witnesses". Here in our parish community, our family of Jesus-followers, we also have examples of faithful living of the Gospel message. The preacher may not want to name individuals, but there are groups that could be highlighted, the infirmed, hard-working parents, (including single parents), volunteers both within the parish and in the larger community, social workers and medical personnel, those

working for laws that protect children, the elderly and homeless, etc.

At this Eucharist Jesus calls us to the same commitment he asked of his original band of followers. He calls out “Fire!” to us. He wants no small investment of our time and talents. He does not offer us a “convenient” religion that comfortably fits into our “life style”—a quick one hour trip to church on Sunday.

Someone visiting our church might ask, “How much does it cost to join this church?” Our initial response is, “Nothing, God’s grace and forgiveness are free to all.” But being faithful members might very well cost us a lot. If we respond to the one who is shouting, “Fire!” in our midst, then no lukewarm response is adequate.

We hunger for this Eucharist today. Our commitment and passion for the Gospel has not exactly set the world aflame. We need the One who comes into our lives at this worship today to burn away the dull habits and routines of our religious practices and purify our hearts with a renewed enthusiasm for the Gospel that can set the world aglow with the warmth of God’s love and justice.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., “Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters: Biblical Justice Homilies Throughout the Year.” New York: Paulist Press, 1998.

Burghardt’s 47 homilies in this eleventh collection of his carefully prepared preachings are good examples of what this preacher means when he says that every good homily must be a “justice homily”. These are homilies for Sundays during the liturgical seasons, as well as for special feasts and occasions—even weddings!

QUOTABLE

Biblical fidelity is, very simply, a question of right relationships. Not only what can be demonstrated from philosophy or has been written into law. Even more importantly, what a covenant demands” for the Jewish believer, his/her covenant with Yahweh; for the Christian, our covenant with God cut in the blood of Christ.

Every genuine homily teases out right relationships: to God, to God’s people, to God’s earth. And not in the first instance what the human mind at its best can devise. Primarily the relationships God has revealed: from Sinai to the Sermon on the Mount, through prophets from

Isaiah to Malachi and in the “signs of the times” that intimate divine designs for God’s people....

It is impossible to preach a good homily that is not a justice homily in the biblical understanding of justice.”

–Walter Burghardt in the Preface to “Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters...”