

**“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 21<sup>st</sup> SUNDAY -C-**

Isaiah 66: 18-21 Psalm 117 Hebrews 12: 5-7, 11-13 Luke 13: 22-30

*By Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

It's a strained gospel today. It sounds demanding and carries dread and dire warnings for the complacent. First there is the issue of the question. If I were traveling with Jesus on this journey he and his disciples are making to Jerusalem, what would make me ask him about the number of people to be saved? Maybe I had heard his invitation to both righteous and sinners to turn their lives around and accept the reign of God. I might have observed how many rejected his message, or after a brief enthusiastic response, had turned back to their old ways, unchanged by his having passed through their lives. Seeing all this, I might have felt sad for those who were missing the opportunity of a life time. I would express my concern to him, “Lord, will only a few people be saved?” He would hear my concern and sadness and respond in kind. We would commiserate with each other.

Instead, I notice Jesus' stern response, “Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough.” What could explain such a response? It even sounds like a rebuke? Well maybe the question wasn't asked with concern or compassion. Maybe there was a smug tone in the questioner's voice, as if to suggest he or she considered themselves on the “saved” list, while all those others weren't. If that were the case, Jesus would turn such smugness on its heels, as if to say, “Forget about passing judgment on others, look to your own efforts as a disciple. Stop being complacent, tend to your own condition. Are you so sure you are living the kind of discipleship you should?” His voice may sound stern, but his intention is to keep us from complacency and prevent us from falling into the trap of judging others.

Passing judgment on others is a distraction for the disciple. So is complacency. If a disciple becomes complacent, such a relaxed attitude can cause the disciple to go into “automatic pilot” and just cruise along. We risk losing a sense of the living and energizing Spirit who feeds and nourishes the involved disciple. It seems to me that the people who are most alive and energetic, those who are sensitive and responsive to the world around them-- are those who have rolled up their sleeves and gotten engaged in the daily work God has given them to do. They aren't just busy people—Lord knows there are enough workaholics among us! Instead, they approach even the seeming mundane tasks that are part of life with a sense of call and a clarity about their vocation. They face both the ordinary and the interruptive events with dedication and vision. They know what they are about in life, and above all, they know Who walks with them and helps them respond with grace to the challenges we all face.

I guess you can sum it up by saying they are “conscious Christians.” They “strive to enter through the narrow gate,” not because they feel they have to please God, but rather they have experienced, through Christ, that they are already pleasing to God. God is the source of their call, and the Spirit of Jesus is the energy that enables them to “strive to enter through the narrow gate.” Remember, that throughout the Gospel, Jesus says in one way or another, “Little flock, it has pleased the Father to give you the kingdom.” Those who receive this gift he offers experience joy, not because their tasks are easy, but because they already know the intimacy of God in their daily “strivings.” (No one is denying that Christian labor is hard work. Luke gives us a clue to this reality in his use of the word “Agonizes the,” translated today as “strive.” It is also source of our word agony.)

The place God has reserved for the just, according to Jesus’ parables and image-filled language, is large and spacious. There the tables are straining under the weight of the choicest food and drink. There the rich and those invited in from the byways dine at the same table as equals. There those who think they are first are last, and those who have been always treated as last, now are first. The admission is free, but the narrow gate requires a change in our lives, serious shifts in priorities concerning what and whom we call important. None of the changes we must make to get in the narrow gate can be done by mere determination and effort on our part. We have been sparked by a new fire God has ignited in our hearts through the preaching and life of Jesus. Remember the fire Jesus wanted ignited in last week’s Gospel? Well, it is now aflame in the believer’s heart and it will not only light the way towards the narrow gate, it will be the force that pushes us through. Jesus’ reminder that we enter a narrow gate isn’t meant to inflict pain on us, or to make us feel like outsiders. Rather, he invites us to respond to his invitation to the banquet by a life. In addition, we are asked to show an awareness of the gift we have received by the way we live our lives.

Aren’t there good things we need to be doing; things we have put off by procrastination? There are the everyday chores, the room that needs painting, an unfinished term paper, a thank you note not written, leaves that need raking, etc. How much better we feel when they are done! There are also the bigger decisions we are putting off. And how much better we will feel when we get to do them: the conversation we must initiate; the simplification of our lives for the sake of the environment; the sick friend who needs a regular visit; the reconciliation long overdue, etc. No room for complacency, the parable of the locked door warns us that the time is short. “We ate and drank in your company, and you taught in our streets.” We went to church, we put money in the basket, and we sent our kids for religious instruction. Disciples need to hear the parable that keeps us alert and striving to make the vision of the banquet a reality in some ways now. For life is short, nothing human is permanent, the doors of opportunity will be shut.

Each day also sees endings and opportunities missed. Remember the old “Examination of Conscience” we were taught to make at the end of each day? We were supposed to be contrite for the faults and sins of that day. In response to the parable, we might make what someone has called an Examination of Consciousness. How conscious or aware was I this day of God’s numerous gifts? How well did I respond to the opportunities to witness and serve in Jesus’ name: to forgive, feed, clothe, and love those who entered my life? How much did I “strive to enter through the narrow gate”?

Churchgoers can get as complacent as those in the gospel who claimed Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the prophets as their ancestors in faith. But those who made this protest to Jesus were unlike their ancestors in faith, were men and women who responded to God’s voice with joyful hearts and actions on behalf of God. Those who heard Jesus preaching and even ate and drank with him, failed to respond to him in anything but a superficial way. As a result, they must listen to the difficult teaching that they will be excluded from the heavenly banquet table and cut off from the very ancestors they claim with such pride.

### **ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:**

Paul Janowiak, The Holy Preaching: The Sacramentality of the Word in the Liturgical Assembly. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000. Paper, 201 pages, \$24.95.

A serious work that focuses on the sacramentality of the Word and the often-underappreciated presence of Christ when the Word is proclaimed in the liturgical assembly. A book worthy of study by any liturgical preacher. Very valuable is the survey of Protestant and Catholic theologies of the Word of God. Not a quick read, but a worthwhile one.

### **QUOTABLE:**

If we have learned anything from the mistakes of the past it is that God reveals himself [sic.] to all people in some way and that each cultural group makes a contribution to the mystery of the divine presence. The image of God is preserved in the cultural mores of the community and in its myths, legends, stories, religious practices and beliefs. Evangelization is not only bringing the Good News of God’s grace to a people but also the discovery of the divine presence revealed overtime to human beings sincerely in search of meaning and truth.

---Rosendo Urrabazo, CFM

## 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.)

*There are low-income people who must work two and even three jobs because minimum wage does not provide enough for them and their families. The following is from a newspaper article describing the need for a “living wage” for these people.*

“Baltimore passed the first living-wage law in 1994; an initiative has grown into a grass-roots campaign to raise the minimum wage to a level that can actually pay for life’s necessities. By the Federal Government’s own figuring, the breadwinner in a family of four would have to earn \$17,650, or \$8.49 an hour, to escape poverty, and a living wage of around \$10 or so would add a small cushion.

So far, more than 60 municipalities and counties in the United States have passed living-wage ordinances and about 75 others are contemplating them, according to Jen Kern, the director of the Living Wage Resource Center of the Association of Community Organization for Reform Now in Washington, known as Acorn, an important force in the movement. The laws generally cover workers at businesses that have contracted with a city or county government.

To be sure, 60 is a tiny fraction of the local governments in America, but proponents say the movement is gaining momentum, especially after a nationally publicized sit-in at Harvard in April by students demanding a living wage for university workers.”

---New York Times, Wednesday, July 18, 2001, page G-1.