

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 21st SUNDAY -C-

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

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The passage from Isaiah is from the third major section of the book (Chapters 56-66). The unknown author of this part is writing about Israel's return to glory after the Exile. Israel, and in particular the holy city of Jerusalem, will be a witness to the power and greatness of God—the one who saves the defeated. God's greatness will shine forth from the formerly destroyed political and religious center of the country, Jerusalem. But the renewal will now include more than the nation. All will share in its benefits; all will be gathered as a holy people.

The people had turned from God to make alliances with foreign nations and worship other gods. As a result of their misplaced confidences they fell and were lead off to exile. But God would not let go of them. In exile a remnant stayed faithful despite their sufferings and the seeming absence of God. This faithful remnant may be the “sign” alluded to. They become a powerful witness to God, “they shall Procavia my glory among the nations.” God plans to use them to proclaim God's faithfulness and power to all the nations and invite them to enter the holy city. The new Jerusalem will include people from all nations.

Jesus is our example of the good and faithful person who goes through a period of trials and even death still trusting God. Through Jesus people come to know the fidelity of God. What was destroyed is raised up, what was dead is given new life. For Isaiah, a faithful band of witnesses will announce the news of God's restoring love and invite all people to Jerusalem to see the manifestation of God's power and fidelity. For us, Jesus is the “sign” of God's fidelity. The God who raises him form the dead offers us that same new life through him.

The preacher might draw upon other examples of “signs”--- witnesses who stay faithful to God despite suffering and apparent defeat. The faithful sick of the parish community are one obvious sign of fidelity. They have not given up on God, nor has God withdrawn from them in their sickness. If the parish has the custom at the Eucharist of giving communion to the ministers of the sick and homebound, this would be a day to highlight this moment. Remind the congregation what powerful signs the sick are for us of God's fidelity. The sick remind us, through their ministry to us, that God and the community will abandon us in our own time of dependence and loss of health. Sickness is like “exile”, a going off to a strange land stripped of possessions and accustomed life. But the sick can be encouraging signs to us that neither God nor the community will forget us in exile.

We seem to be in the right place this moment as we hear today's Gospel. We are at church worshipping together. We are hearing the teaching of Jesus and saying prayers. We may even be experiencing a certain comfortableness. We are doing the right thing and are in the right place for it. But as usual, Jesus is a "disturber of the peace." And he, as he does so often, uses a parable to shake us out of our comfort zone and question our complacency.

In Jesus' world, as in our own, there were "insiders" and "outsiders." A person would be an insider by their birth into a family or group. Or one might become part of the family/group by being invited to eat with the members. Thus, in their distress because they are being excluded, the people in the story "prove" they are part of the group-- "we ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets." But Jesus says more is required. Earlier in this chapter (13: 3,5) Jesus says quite plainly, that repentance, a change in the direction of one's life is required. They say to him, "But...you taught in our streets." The question back to them is, "Yes, but did you follow my teachings and change your life?" Mere church membership, even regular church attendance, is not enough. Our lives must be marked by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We are given the gift of forgiveness; but a subsequent change of life is expected as a response.

There is a danger of treating church as if it's a building-- a building with a moat built around it. Once a week the bells ring, the drawbridge comes down and we pass out of our daily world into the "other world" of church--- prayers, hymns and rituals. Then we leave this rarified atmosphere and return to our world. The drawbridge goes up until we are ready to enter religion again next week. If that describes us in some way, if our lives "out there" are not marked by a deep transformation as a result of Jesus' entrance into them, then he is saying to us, "I do not know where you come from." We are not of his family, not members of the new community he has come to invite all to enter.

The opening line of today's Gospel reading reminds us that Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem. There he will show the extent of the sacrifice he is willing to make for us. Hence, what he says in this passage is seen through the lens of his own death and resurrection. This section of Luke (9:51-18: 4) is a long journey narrative. It is less a geographical journey than a literary device that invites us to see the journey of our own lives in the light of Jesus.' Our lives have been described as a journey; they have a beginning and will have an end. The homiletician David Buttrick sums it up succinctly, "...our lives are as brief as the hyphen between dates on a gravestone." (Quoted in "Living Pulpit", page 36. Cf below.) As harsh as Jesus' response seems, it is a sobering word that offers the grace that helps us to come to our senses. Time is brief, as brief as the "hyphen between the dates on our tombstone." We need to take stock of where we are, where we intend to go and what we are doing to keep focused on that goal.

It's clear from today's parable that for Jesus, being born Christian or being a member of a Christian community, are simply not enough. Others will "take their place at the feast in the kingdom of God"--because they heard and responded to Jesus. While those who just "joined up" will be left out because they failed to make the commitment he requires. Maybe those who don't go to church will take a seat at God's table ahead of us because their lives better reflect that of Jesus'. Harsh sounding notions today from the one who wants to shake us out of our complacency.

ONE GOOD PUBLICATION FOR THE PREACHER

"The Living Pulpit", July-September 1998, Volume 7 Number 3. The theme of this issue is death. It asks the question to preachers, "How and when does the preacher speak of death?" The articles are from a variety of perspectives. Also includes quotes from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, as well as those of great writers and thinkers.

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QUOTABLE

"The society in which we live appears to be caught in the terror of death as more and more people are being abandoned to food pantries and homeless shelters. The most critical issue facing our society is what is happening to those who are poor. More and more people are being moved off welfare and sinking deeper into poverty. They, too, are staring down the terrors of death, the death that comes when compassion, caring and civil responsibility die. The death that comes when there is a poverty of the spirit and the soul."

—Yvonne V. Delk, "Wrestling With the Terrors of Death", in "Living Pulpit". (cf. above)