

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 24th SUNDAY -C-
Exodus 32: 7-11, 13-14 Psalm 51 I Timothy 1: 12-17 Luke 15: 1-32
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Some people have good biblical memories; they can memorize verse after verse of their favorite passages. Such memory acuity comes in handy at important moments in a person's life: times of joy, wonder at creation, grief, gratitude for help received, contrition, religious discussions, etc. The good-memory folks have an appropriate scriptural verse at hand for these and other times. I envy them. I have problems remembering authors' names, book titles and more than two lines of poetry! What is this bible reader and many others like me, to do?

Well, if your memory is like mine, here is a short cut for you. All you have to do is remember a few key words that keep coming up in scripture----“Since,” “But” and “So.” They each have a few synonyms like them, but for this discussion, let's just deal with these and see how they show up in the scriptures. We will use today's passages as examples.

“Since”— in a passage look for this word. It introduces the human situation, the predicament we find ourselves caught in. So, in Exodus today, God describes the people God is sending Moses back to, “...they have become depraved....” “They have soon turned aside from the way I pointed out to them....” And, still more, the people are “stiff-necked.” It appears that God had given up on them, about to let them go their own mis-chosen way and is just as happy to be rid of them. They have given God a divine headache.

The preacher can easily draw a parallel to today's world—we see signs of “depravity,” “idol worship” and a “stiff-necked people” all too frequently in our war-torn, torture-inflicted, violence-prone world. The local, national and international pages of our newspapers bear ample witness that people haven't changed much since God had this conversation with Moses. We can call this the “Since” segment of the passage---- it describes our existence apart from God. It's as if the passage is saying, “Since this is the way you are, something needs to be done for you.” Or “Since you can't get out of this condition on your own, God is going to have to step in and act on your behalf.” Once our condition has been made explicit, we are ready for a turn in the passage.

It appears when we read... “But”. (“But Moses implored the Lord....) Moses speaks up for his sinful people. By the way, did you catch the earlier reference God makes to Moses about “your people?” God isn't claiming them any longer; Moses can have them. Here is where Moses

interjects with “But”—and reminds God about “your own people.” These are God’s people, the descendants of God’s faithful servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel. The people have a strong intermediary in Moses, one who implores God to “remember” the ties God has with these people, and the promises God has made with them. On their own, the people don’t deserve God’s mercy—BUT—God does not forget them and again will offer grace to an undeserving people.

A shift in the story has begun to take place and we now hear the “So”—“So the Lord relented in the punishment God had threatened to inflict on God’s own people.” The narrative attributes all kinds of human emotions to God, it’s all part of a well-told story. We do get the point, don’t we? We cannot miss the “So” moment. God is a passionate lover of the people and will not give up on them—or us— even when we exhibit small or large “depravity,” or are “stiff-necked.” The focus is on God, and the story is another story of grace. The clue to grace’s entrance begins with a “But” and has its consequences in a “So.” Are you still with me?

Let’s see if this rule of thumb applies to the I Timothy reading. Here we have a much more personal account, not of a people, but of Paul himself. He tells his own story of conversion. First, he tells us what he once was like on his own—this is the “Since” part. (As if he were saying, “Since I was once a sinner....”) Once, he tells us, he was a “blasphemer, and a persecutor and arrogant...” He reminds us that he had persecuted Christians; he certainly didn’t earn God’s favor on his own. Then he quickly changes the course of his narrative---here comes the grace-moment. Watch for the signal word--BUT. “...but I have been mercifully treated.” Later, he plays the same grace card again, “But...I was mercifully treated.”

For Paul, the “SO” announces the consequence of God’s stepping into his life. With the “So, Paul describes the effects of grace on his life. Now he is different and, surprise of surprises, the once persecutor of Christians has become a sign of Christ’s mercy. “...so that in me, as the foremost, Christ Jesus might display all his patience....” We know how successful Paul’s preaching ministry was. He could have a lot to boast about; but, as we see in today’s reading, and many like it, Paul saw his success coming solely from God working in him. Thus, he ends with a doxology of praise to God. We at Eucharist this day can make his closing words our own. We celebrate the moments God’s grace came freely to us, starting with our baptism, but also grace’s appearances throughout our lives. Amazing grace! We take Paul’s words to this celebration, and we join him and each other in a heartfelt prayer of praise for the Christ life in us. “To the ruler of ages, incorruptible, invincible, the only God, honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Let’s try our sequence of words on today’s gospel. The opening verse establishes the tone and

context of the reading. The Pharisees and scribes criticize Jesus for the company he keeps—“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Because of what follows, the three parables about losing and finding, some have called this section of Luke, “the lost and found department.” Each of the parables Jesus tells to those who are criticizing him starts with a lost item: a sheep, coin or son. There’s the implied “Since” part of the passage—since we are lost something must be done for us that we cannot do for ourselves. We don’t have three parables that emphasize moral guilt as much as stories about things lost and found. Notice too that the object that is lost is very valuable and missed by ones who treasure them. Draw the parallel: when we humans find ourselves lost, there is One who values us and both searches for us and is anxiously waiting our return home.

Jesus is telling these parables because small, minded people think they are worthy of God’s forgiveness and can’t imagine that God extends mercy beyond what they consider “reasonable limits.” They are like the older son who can’t believe the father could be so extravagant in forging his reckless and thoughtless younger brother.

Let’s see how the three words we are emphasizing fit these parables. “Since” somethings of value were lost and could not get “un-lost” on their own, a searcher steps into the scene [the “But-moment”] to reverse the desperate situation. “So”-- as a result of this intercession, a whole new future is opened up and people are called in to celebrate.

Apply these three words to our lives. Recall moments when we found ourselves on our own searching for an opening, a way out of the dark. That’s the “Since”—since we were unable to help ourselves.... “Since” we needed something we could not provide for ourselves.... Now recall the event or person that broke the downward spiral. Who or what happened to change things? That’s the “But” moment--- when we were helped at a moment we knew we could not do it on our own. Now call to mind the “So”—what new life, possibilities or opportunities were made possible because of the gift we were given?

This Eucharist gives us a chance to recall how we once were lost and were gifted and then enabled to start over—how we have been “found.” At this celebration we have a chance to do what the folks in the parable did, celebrate the finding of something very valued. But some gathered at this liturgy may feel in the first stage of the biblical journey: we find ourselves mired in the situations we have gotten ourselves into either deliberately or without sufficient forethought. This Eucharist reminds us that we are not on our own, the Seeker is out looking for us, in fact we celebrate that we have already been found, are offered forgiveness and a new future.

JUSTICE NOTES

“Called to Embrace All of Life”

Election year statement by Pax Christi (A national Catholic Peace Movement)

It is a common misperception of politicians seeking office that the Catholic vote can be courted by addressing a narrow range of issues. In reality, the great majority of Catholics in the U.S., in agreement with the U.S. Catholic Bishops, will vote for candidates based “on the full range of issues, as well as on [the candidate’s] personal integrity, philosophy, and performance” (“Faithful Citizenship,” U.S. Catholic Bishops, 2004).

Members of the media—and indeed a few of our own religious leaders—do a great disservice to our church and nation when they attempt to use one or another issue as the benchmark for Catholic identity. To characterize the whole content of our faith in a single issue is inappropriate and unjust.

“The Christian faith is an integral unity, and thus it is incoherent to isolate some particular element to the detriment of the whole of Catholic doctrine. A political commitment to a single isolated aspect of the Church’s social doctrine does not exhaust one’s responsibility towards the common good” (“Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life,” Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, November 24, 2002, and approved by the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II).

The Catholic Church teaches that ALL life is sacred. A candidate for office must understand that the Church stands against any policy or course of action which diminishes life, dignity, or the rights of the human person: abortion, capital punishment, war, scandalous poverty, denial of healthcare, mistreatment of immigrants and racism, to name but a few. All are essential issues to a “pro-life” voter.

For over 30 years, Pax Christi USA has raised the immorality and injustice of modern warfare as a serious affront to our Church’s proclamation of the sanctity of life. Over the past two years we have seen nearly 900 U.S. military and over 15,000 innocent Iraqi civilians killed in what Pope John Paul II repeatedly stated was an unjust and unnecessary war. Contrary to words used in political speeches, a commitment to the sanctity of life must be judged by the actions taken to defend and promote life in ALL its forms. War is a defeat for the culture of life and political leaders that bring about or perpetuate war sin against God and humanity and cannot be considered in any sense of the word, “pro-life.”

There are 60 million Catholics in the U.S. We take the responsibility of voting seriously. Each

of us will evaluate candidates based on what our conscience—formed by reading the signs of the times in light of the example of Jesus in the Scriptures and the teachings of our Church throughout the ages—demands.

We will examine the broad range of issues, measuring “all candidates, policies, parties, and platforms by how they protect or undermine the life, dignity, and rights of the human person, whether they protect the poor and vulnerable and advance the common good” (“Faithful Citizenship,” U.S. Catholic Bishops, 2004).

In the gospels, Jesus implores us to love our enemies, to feed the hungry, to bless the peacemakers, to set the oppressed free, and to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. This November, we will look for and vote for candidates who take as seriously as we do the teachings and example of Jesus Christ.

“A Catholic moral framework does not easily fit the ideologies of "right" or "left," nor the platforms of any party...Our responsibility is to measure all candidates, policies, parties, and platforms by how they protect or undermine the life, dignity, and rights of the human person, whether they protect the poor and vulnerable and advance the common good.”—from "Faithful Citizenship," issued by the United States Catholic Bishops

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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:.....

- Thomas M. Adams #0001694 (On death row since 9/2/95)
- Leslie Warren #0487180 (10/6/95)
- Darrell Strickland #0393145 (10/27/95)

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