

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 25th SUNDAY -C-

Amos 8: 4-7 Psalm 113 I Timothy 2: 1-8 Luke 16: 1-13

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The first and gospel readings today get us out into the market place. They give us cause to reflect on how we deal with money and what we might call “the things of this world.” The gospel doesn’t voice condemnations about wealth and material things, as if the world of matter and daily life is evil and some other “higher world,” purer---instead, we get some serious cautions. The wise disciple would do well to pay attention to what Jesus says about “dishonest wealth.”

But first the Amos reading. The prophet does what prophets normally do, he speaks up for the vulnerable and against the unscrupulous privileged. He convicts those who trample on the poor. These merchants are so preoccupied with getting more from their dishonest practices that they can’t wait till the religious feasts are over so that they can return to their financial scheming. While they may externally observe the sabbath and special lunar celebrations, they are not religious at heart since they don’t take the spirit of these rituals into their daily business practices. They “diminish the ephah [a dry measure like a bushel], add to the shekel [used for measuring], and fix the scales for cheating.” The poor have to purchase their wheat from these scoundrel merchants, and their lives are so tenuous they often must sell themselves into slavery to pay their debts or get food for their families. And they are being cheated! Meanwhile you can hear the chuckling merchants saying, “We will buy the lowly for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals, even the refuse of the wheat we will sell.

Prophets like Amos make it quite clear, religion is not just for certain “holy days.” Rather, each day is holy and our lives, both at home and at work, must express that we are, as Jesus calls us today in the gospel, “children of light.” The prophet reminds us that God has noticed how a privileged few have taken advantage of a vulnerable many. These evils, Amos says, are not overlooked by God, who swears that such evil will not be forgotten. God has a long memory when it comes to the injustices done against the poor. God’s concern for them is so passionate and consistent that God’s eyes peruse our business dealings to make sure we too have not forgotten them.

The gospel today has four sections tied together by common subject matter. Some think that the subsequent sayings are commentaries on the parable, like reflective notes. The preacher may want to focus on one for this preaching; but keep the context in mind.

Even a quick reading shows that lots of questions are raised in today's passage. For example, in the first parable, is the "master" who commended the dishonest steward, the Lord or the rich man of the story? Then there is the issue of the discounts the steward gives his master's debtors. Is it possible the steward's "squandering" was the extravagant interest he charged the master's debtors, hoping to pocket the profits for himself? When he got caught, maybe he just eliminated the extra he tacked on to the debts. Did he cut his losses to provide for his future security? Or perhaps he was guilty of excessive usury and now he has rectified himself. If so, the owner's property isn't affected by the steward's discounts, just the steward's illegal gains. There are other issues in the readings that might move the preacher to search some biblical commentaries, space limits our discussion here.

In today's parable of the scheming manager, we have a continuity with last week's parable of the prodigal son. Once again we hear of a misappropriation of property that belonged to another. Again, we find a person in dire straits trying to figure a way to get out. The manager has a plan to make those indebted to his master indebted to him. Jesus is using a situation of "this world," (this age) and plays it off against the "children of the light," those who belong to his realm (his age). The two realms are incompatible, the person who pursues one cannot at the same time pursue the other. Those "prudent in dealing with their own generation" have misplaced their energies and goals. Better to apply ourselves to figuring out what it means to be "children of light," which is a constant and attention-absorbing task that, while it keeps us in this world, fixes our hearts and desires on what has deep and lasting worth ("eternal dwellings").

Jesus' coming into our lives announces another way of seeing God, ourselves and the world. He has started a process of profound change; nothing can be the same for the one who accepts him and for the community linked together in his name through baptism. His arrival and the promise of his return have got to have an impact on how we look out at the world. During the summer a group of us were at the end of Long Island, where there are extraordinary mansions. (Lots of poverty

too!) We saw one mansion worth 50 million dollars— a huge estate with a large house, cottages, a pool, tennis court, horse stables, etc. One in the group said, “Well it’s his money, he can do with it as he pleases.” It makes perfect sense, doesn’t it? Why shouldn’t a person be extravagant and use his/her money at will?” It’s theirs, isn’t it? They earned it, didn’t they?

The gospel today suggests Jesus would consider that kind of thinking as belonging to “the children of this world.” Such people are shrewd and know how to get what they want, when they want it and how they want it. Jesus would call that kind of wealth “dishonest wealth,” for wealth and property can put blinders on a person, limiting their vision, causing them to “gain the whole world and lose their soul.” He would say, “What good is that?”

But we are not multi-millionaires, we can’t afford such extravagance. Jesus can’t have us in mind when he speaks such dire words. We work hard at our livelihood, try to put aside money for our children’s education, our retirement, the mortgage, a new car, our church, favorite charities, etc. So, we are in a pretty good space, aren’t we certainly exempt from a parable that talks about wealth? Maybe, but who is immune from the gospel’s call to be attentive and stay awake to the consequences of our daily actions and attitudes? Whether we have much or little, we need to open our ears and hearts to what tempts us to selfishness, self-gain, having more stuff, turning in on one’s own life, putting on blinders that limit our vision to just our own blood and friends.

We hear in today’s gospel an oft-repeated Lucan message; be suspicious about wealth and the world’s goods. Riches of any kind can be a trap to enslave those who have them. Thus, we are cautioned: be wise in the use of possessions. We have examples in Luke’s gospel of people who wisely used their money. For example, there was Zaccheus who promised Jesus, “I give half my belongings, Lord, to the poor. If I have defrauded anyone in the least, I pay that one back fourfold” (9:8). Others in Luke’s gospel and Acts make their resources, money and property, available to Jesus, his disciples and the early church.

Jesus would suggest this generous use of the world’s goods is a way of “making friends” for ourselves with “dishonest wealth.” Rather than money and possessions tripping us up, we can wisely use them to benefit ourselves and others. The steward squandered his master’s property. He realizes the crisis at hand; he is

about to find himself out on the street and he is not strong enough to labor, nor humble enough to beg. Now in jeopardy, he knows what to do; he is no dummy when his future is on the line. In fact, he is lauded for his acting “prudently.” (The Greek word here suggest he has everyday wisdom; he know what he had to do, so he did it.)

Jesus highlights this kind of wisdom and tells us we should use what we have in ways that secure us “eternal dwellings.” What we do with whatever “wealth” we have, little or a lot, has consequences for us, which can be either temporary and passing, or significant and eternal. We know that Jesus isn’t just addressing the “big money” folks, since he goes on to challenge us to be “trustworthy” in “very small” matters. Whatever we have has been entrusted to us; what we do about it counts in his eyes.

Maybe my mother had it right after all. When we kids didn’t like the food she put in front of us or when we didn’t finish what she gave us to eat, she would say, “Remember the starving Chinese children.” (Sometimes I felt the eyes of 100 million Chinese kids were on me as I ate that dreaded spinach!) Mom did get the point across: we had what others didn’t. So, we needed to be careful (“prudent”) about such “wealth,”—we were not to waste it or take it for granted. And Jesus might add, now that we are adults, “Look to those who have not and do something for them with what you have—“make friends for yourselves.” Using what we have to make friends—that would certainly change the world, wouldn’t it? Our nation that has so much, ought to follow that advice too. (We consume 40% of the world’s natural goods—conservation in our homes and neighborhoods might be a “prudent” starting point.) If we shared what we have with individuals and nations, in a “friendly,” not patronizing manner, then friendship and trust might characterize how we treated others and how they us—as “friends.”

Remember our self-righteous gaze at that 50-million-dollar estate? Jesus invites his disciples to gaze at and judge our own situations. Of course, we have to provide for the present and future of ourselves and our families. But do we really need all we have and plan to get? Are we entitled to it all? How can we use what we have in ways that reflect that we know this present world is not all there is to our lives? We, after all, are planning to be “welcomed into eternal dwellings.”

Wisdom and the skills to act as “prudent...children of light” are gifts that God’s

Spirit offers us. The world is a complicated place, we cannot navigate it independently, for while we appreciate the things of this world, Jesus cautions us that they can seduce us to ways that lead to a loss of integrity and dilution of our Christian commitment. The eucharistic food of today's assembly helps keep us firmly fixed as "children of light." Here we receive the One who had clear vision and who served God alone. We invite his Spirit to keep us clear eyed as people who already have a share in his "eternal dwelling."

QUOTABLE

The time of innocence...is not past. It is no longer possible for [humankind] to blunder about self-indulgently. Our species has become too powerful to be led by instincts alone. Birds and lemmings cannot do much damage except to themselves, whereas we can destroy the entire matrix of life on the planet. The awesome powers we have stumbled into require a commensurate responsibility. As we become aware of the motives that shape our actions, as our place in the chain of evolution becomes clearer, we must find a meaningful and binding plan that will protect us and the rest of life from the consequence of what we have wrought."

----Mihaly Csikszentimihalyi, THE EVOLVING SELF: A PSYCHOLOGY FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), page 18.

JUSTICE NOTES

Everyday Experience

Our community also brings to public life *broad experience in serving those in need*. Every day, the Catholic community educates the young, cares for the sick, shelters the homeless, feeds the hungry, assists needy families, welcomes refugees, and serves the elderly. In defense of life, we reach out to children and to the sick, elderly, and disabled who need help. We support women in difficult pregnancies, and we assist those wounded by the trauma of abortion and domestic violence. On many issues, we speak for those who have no voice. These are not abstract issues for us; they have names and faces. We have practical expertise and daily experience to contribute to the public debate.

A Community of People

The *Catholic community* is large and diverse. We are Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. We are members of every race, come from every ethnic background, and live in urban, rural, and suburban communities in all fifty states. We are CEOs and migrant farm workers, senators and persons on public assistance, business owners and union members. But all Catholics are called to a common commitment to protect human life and stand with those who are poor and vulnerable. We are all called to provide a moral haven for our democracy, to be the salt of the earth.

-----“Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility”---US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003.

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:.....

- Jerry Dale Hill #0511057 (On death row since 10/31/95)
- Keith B. East #0511998 (11/8/95)
- John D. Mc Neil #0275678 (11/10/95)

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