

**“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 27<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY -C-**

Habakkuk 1: 2-3, 2: 2-4 Psalm 95 2 Timothy 1: 6-8, 13-14 Luke 17: 5-10

*By: Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

The gospel begins with a plea. What would prompt a follower of Jesus to ask for an increase of faith? Doesn't a request like this usually flow from a person whose faith is being tested or strained by life's demands? For example, in the first reading, Habakkuk must be undergoing severe testing from the violence that surrounds him and, worse, by God's seeming indifference. "I cry to you 'Violence!' but you do not intervene." He is confronted, he says, by "destruction and violence....strife and clamorous discord." It sounds like a moment in the prophet's life when he too might cry out, as one of Jesus' followers does in the gospel—"Increase our faith!"

Similarly, the apostles must feel their own faith stressed, for they say to the Lord, "Increase our faith." But what makes them aware of this need? The context of this passage reveals a very particular demand put on their faith. Looking back a few verses in chapter 17 we notice that Jesus has just spoken about not leading others into sin (vv.1-2), about giving correction to a brother or sister—never an easy thing—and then that they must be constantly willing to forgive a repentant brother or sister (vv.3-4)—hardest of all!

No wonder the apostles feel their faith is insignificant! Hence the request, "Increase our faith." Aren't we also inclined to make the same plea as we face the need for similar Christian responses to life's arduous demands? For example, family life requires a deep pool from which to draw patience and forgiveness. In addition, recent disclosures have shown how devastating the effects of scandal are on the life of our faith community. And a parish would not last long if forgiveness didn't characterize its daily life—from the pews all the way to parish council, staff and clergy.

The apostles realize such consistent Christian living is impossible without faith, so they want more of it, figuring QUANTITY is the issue. But Jesus says, even faith the size of a mustard seed would be enough to unearth the deeply rooted mulberry tree and cast it into the sea. We know he is using strong figurative language here. But he does make his point: it is not the quantity but the QUALITY of faith that matters. Faith, it seems, doesn't have to increase--- as much as exist! Having faith doesn't automatically give the believer the power to perform crowd-pleasing spectacles. But faith does mean that we are in touch with God and experience God as the source of the power that enables us to live good Christian lives, marked by the ability to forgive many times----as we ourselves have been forgiven by God. Such forgiveness

in our faith community would be a powerful sign that God's life animates us and that God lives among us.

The servant in the parable is a pretty hard worker. Even after a full day in the fields he is still expected to wait on table. Is God as demanding as the employer in the parable? Are we, who are trying to do our best, merely "unprofitable servants" after all? Is God ever pleased with our efforts? Do we ever get a break? We have to remember that this is a parable, so let's not draw strict parallels between the master in the story and God. That's not where Jesus is going with this parable.

Having heard what Jesus just said about not giving scandal and about forgiving those who wrong us, we can draw the conclusion that we, like the servant in the parable, are only doing what we are supposed to do when we follow these teachings. The parable suggests we are not owed any special favors or rewards for our good works. A parallel might be that, while we give our children an allowance, we don't tip them every time they clear the table or take out the garbage. They are doing what they are supposed to be doing. Jesus leaves no room for our having a "claim" on God; God owes us nothing. Nor do we have anything to boast about, except, as Paul does frequently, we boast in our weakness and God's power at work in us. What we have from God is a graciously-given new life with the ability to be docile and receptive disciples and thus to be able to live an exemplary life marked, especially, by forgiveness. From the start---all is gift.

Whether in the crunch of daily life or as we struggle against larger injustices and wrongs, we are reminded today that the good we do is a gift of God and is quite sufficient to enable us to do what needs to be done to further God's dominion on earth.

Aren't there moments in our lives when we have gotten through a faith-testing time, or when we have done something good, even praise worthy? Today's parable reminds us that we didn't accomplish what we did merely by our hard work or our "stick-to-it-tiveness." Rather, it was first of all God's gift of faith; even though in the midst of the struggles, that faith may have felt as small and insignificant as a mustard seed. Eucharist today gives us reason to give thanks for our "mustard seed faith" for, as we say at the beginning of the Preface, "It is right to give God thanks and praise."

Today's Habakkuk reading is so rich, it deserves special treatment by the preacher. Why not just preach from it? You might use the development of the reading as a guide for your outline, i.e. follow the movement of the reading; develop you homily the way the reading develops. The first part is a Lament. Here the preacher voices a lament by giving words to any pain your

congregation may be experiencing. The question the prophet asks is, "How long?" The prophet is voicing the pain of his people who are experiencing violence and ruin and so wonder why God does not intervene. It's the kind of prayer individuals and communities might make in dire circumstances. In a time of war, church scandal, more people slipping into poverty, the environment being depleted and spoiled, terrorism spreading around the world, etc. there is much to lament. "How long, O God?" Some local communities have ample reason to lament where children are on drugs, the streets are unsafe, a beloved member has experienced a tragic death, a teenager been caught in gang crossfire, etc. Just think about what evils people are experiencing in your setting and speak put public and prayerful words to them.

For example, we may have no solutions for the violence the world is going through. We continue to receive more news reports of suicide bombings, military and civilian casualties in Iraq, African nations wrecked by civil war with millions of refugees, etc. No one expects the preacher to come up with solutions. But we can still say something: we can voice an objection, call people to awareness. We can also voice a lament. Lament to God for these dreadful times, for the neglect of the poor and needy of our country and world whose interests get put aside during times of politics and political campaigning. We can lament the way the prophet does, make complaint to God for things that seem beyond our control but affect us and others so dreadfully. Lament for the suffering of the innocent.

Notice the prophet is not afraid to confront God and speak what, for many of us, is the unspeakable; he accuses God of not caring. This prayer can be the focus of the preaching, a form of prayer that has roots in our Jewish/Christian tradition. (Jesus prayed this prayer of protest in the Garden and the cross, when his plans and life were being abruptly ended.) People have been taught not to speak to God this way and so we grow silent and close off the possibility for dialogue on a deep level. Keeping silence, because we are afraid to utter what we are really feeling, risks closing off the possibility for growth in our relationship with God. It takes deep faith to shake one's fist at God.

Only after the prophet's lament has been voiced does God respond. What was God doing during the first part? Listening. Then there is the order is to write down the vision. Why write? Is it to give it permanence? Or must it be written so that a future generation might also read it? The word "readily"---"so that it can be read 'readily'"--means, write it so large that it can be read on the run. Like a billboard. Are we running because evil is at our heels? If escape or relief doesn't come quickly, we will need to refer to the vision of God's faithfulness over and over to keep us strong in our faith in a God who does not seem to care or respond. "The just, because of faith, shall live"--we are called to fidelity to a God who has promised to be faithful, despite contrary evidence. The Hebrew word for faith is "Emunah," from which comes our "Amen".

Our prayer response is the "Amen" of faith. We are called to faithfulness, and our reward won't be riches but life..."the just, because of faith, shall live."

Lament is an un-American prayer: it is not neat like cellophane wrapped vegetables in a supermarket. It lacks order, it spills over with emotions, it is struggle with loss and it names the loss. It's the prayer we pray when a part of our life comes to an end. We can pray this prayer for

ourselves or in solidarity with a group of people who are suffering. Suppose we prayed this for inner-city people who suffer violence every day, whose children need to sleep in bath tubs so that they won't get hit with stray bullets at night? Suppose we pray this prayer for parents in Iraq who fear for the safety of their children amid the bombings.... and for parents of our soldiers too....for the refugees in Sudan, etc.? This prayer on behalf of others might also mobilize us to do something about the very situation for which we pray.

### QUOTABLE

What is it that makes this fire in a preacher? It is a passionate love for Jesus Christ. The most indispensable love in the life of the preacher is this love for Christ. Without it, there may be profound research, stirring thought and emotion, a virtuoso delivery, and even applause, but the danger is very real that preaching will eventually degenerate into an exercise of the ego, aiming to please, or entertain, or no longer even aiming. What keeps the preacher alive is a love for Jesus, a deep, personal and intimate love. It is what sends the preacher searching for the right words, pursuing the understanding of the Scriptures and all the other texts that give substance to preaching, and which grounds and sustains the preacher's love for the people so that it can grow and develop in the face of ministry's many challenges and even the inevitable disappointments and failure in most of our human relationships. It is this love for Jesus Christ that is the foundation for the preacher's perseverance in struggling to present people with a language to express their faith, to open up more deeply the meaning of the word of God, and to unite them with the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, forever at work enticing all into the fire of divine love.

---James A. Wallace in PREACHING TO THE HUNGERS OF THE HEART: THE HOMILY ON THE FEASTS AND WITHIN THE RITES (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), ISBN, 0-8146-1224-5, page 194

## 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.)

At its core, global climate change is not about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. It is about the future of God's creation and the one human family. It is about protecting both "the human environment" and the natural environment. It is about our human stewardship of God's creation and our responsibility to those who come after us. With these reflections, we seek to offer a word of caution and a plea for genuine dialogue as the United States and other nations face decisions about how best to respond to the challenges of global climate change.

-----Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good, USCCB, 2001 #3

## 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:.....

- George F. Page #0310202 (On death row since 4/26/96)
- Guy T. LeGrande #0238344 (4/26/96)
- Jamie L. Smih #0376917 (5/10/96)

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