

**First Impressions 28<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY -C-**  
2 Kings 5: 14-17   Psalm 98   2 Timothy 2: 8-13   Luke 17:11-19  
*By: Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

PRENOTE: October is *Domestic Violence Awareness Month*. Charles Dahm, OP, a pastor in Chicago, has offered us some help to preach on the subject. He has linked the October Sunday readings with the theme of domestic violence. You can find his reflections on our webpage. Go to <http://www.preacherexchange.com/> and click on “Justice Preaching.” Thanks Chuck!.

The gospel today stirs up some personal memories for me. About six years ago I visited my family during the Christmas season. At the time my father was 95 years old. While I was at home we discovered dad had a fever, so I helped him get dressed and into his wheelchair for a trip to the doctor. While the doctor was examining him he asked me, “Am I going to be ok?” I assured him he would be fine. His question was one I asked him when I was a boy and was sick or scared. He did a similar thing for me when I asked the same question—he told me that things would be ok. He was the man in control, and his voice of assurance was often a comfort for me. His, “Everything is ok,” was enough to calm childhood fears and anxieties. Now, I realized, the roles were reversed; I was the adult in charge, and he was like a child.

Around the same time my mother gave me an old picture of dad taken while he was at work delivering mail in a nearby Brooklyn neighborhood. In the picture he looked about thirty years old, he had a big smile, his stride was jaunty and his mailbag, over his shoulder, was overflowing with magazines and letters. When I looked at the photo I remembered our trip to the doctor when he asked me from his wheelchair, “Am I going to be ok?”. The letter carrier had had quite a journey in his lifetime.

Life is often described as a journey. When we are young we play sports, form some friendships for life, attend schools, plan our futures. There are first dates, falling in love, marriage, career, children and years of hard work. Then there’s retirement, grandchildren, declining physical abilities, illnesses and various limitations. Each stage has its own unique joys. But there are challenges and setbacks as well. There are dreams that don’t pan out; friends who disappoint us; relationships that are strained; divorce, death and other losses that require the necessary readjustments and accommodations. One period is not better than another: each stage, with its joys and challenges, offers us an opportunity for growth and a chance for deepening.

In the course of our lifetime, to borrow a familiar image, we leave footprints in the sand. If we could imagine ourselves looking back, we would see that some prints reveal a period when our stride was light and jaunty, like my father's early years with his mailbag over his shoulder. Other prints look deeper in the sand and reveal periods when we were carrying burdens, some were heavy and we had to drag them behind us. Another period shows marks that reveal a fall or times when we were pressed to our knees. Some prints wander off in another direction and when we look at them we express regret, "What made me do that? What was I thinking at the time? If only I had...."

We can ask ourselves at this Eucharist, at this moment of our lives, "So... how goes the journey?" or, "What's on my mind at this stage of my life's journey?" If we could see the footprints we are leaving in the sand now what would we see? Are they light and wide spaced; do they reveal a buoyancy? Are they dragging and heavy loaded? Or are they off the trail and need to come back to the path?

The gospel has something to say to people on a journey. Jesus himself is on a journey. He is clear where he is and where he is going. It is a difficult journey, and he sees what is waiting for him. Yet he doesn't hold back or choose to take a detour. His journey is taking him to Jerusalem, and he is going there for us. There are people traveling with him: his disciples are learning as they go along the way with him. There are also the merely curious. Just being with him does not make one a disciple. Today, on his journey, Jesus is met by a wandering band of lepers. They don't seem to be going anywhere in particular; they are on an aimless journey of despair.

Where could the lepers go? It doesn't matter to them where they are or where they are going. No one wants them. Since they are considered unclean they couldn't go home to their families. Nor could they go to the temple to pray. They wouldn't be allowed in. I heard a poignant story about lepers once. It was told by a Maryknoll priest who was in Korea about 40 years ago. There were lepers in the area where he lived, and they were not allowed to be with their communities or families. Once a year they went to a playing field. Two ropes were stretched across the field about 50 yards apart. The lepers stood at one rope and their families at another, and they called out to each other—across the erected chasm that separated them—it was their annual "family visit."

The lepers in today's gospel story are an unusual group. They consist of Jews and Samaritans, two groups that didn't mix in usual society. But misery and affliction had united them. As someone once said, "Whatever our social ranking, we all shed the same tears." What difference would religion and past grievances make when you are the lowest of the low—a leper? In some

ways we can identify with the lepers. We are aware of our need for God, who alone can help us. We all have had our missteps and regrets and can feel separated from others. Our presence at Eucharist today says that we want Jesus' company with us on this stage of our journey. We want him to show us the next steps, and we want to stay close to him and one another as we travel.

The gospel today guides our prayer. Whatever stage of our journey we are on, we can learn from the band of lepers and pray, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us." I know that the word "pity" makes some of us feel uncomfortable. We don't want anyone's pity. But we can learn a lesson from the lepers. They have no pretense and no pride to block the expression of their feelings. They see the one who can help them, and they cry out their need. But the lepers aren't cured right away. Jesus orders them to go show themselves to the priests.

Luke tells us, "As they were going they were cleansed." As they journeyed they were made alright, fit for society, with a new beginning and a whole new life ahead of them. Never mind the past footprints of their lives, they could start all over again. I imagine that if they did leave footprints behind as they journeyed to the priests, at first the prints would look heavy. There would be marks showing some dragging their feet, worn out by their wandering and aimless lives. Then the prints would become better spaced, and reveal a lightness, the sure and normal prints of healthy, youthful people who had just been made whole. One of the former lepers, the least likely one, a Samaritan, "realized" what had happened to him as he journeyed. His footprints would change direction as he turned around to go back to Jesus.

He must have "realized" that he was cured---but not because he was particularly religious or deserving. He just "realized" the source of his cure and what Jesus had done for him. Jesus wasn't visibly traveling with them, but the leper remembered and "realized." Jesus, seen or unseen, was with him and had cured him. So, we take a hint from the leper; we who travel together and don't have any visible signs of Jesus around us. At different stages of our lives, we become aware that we need healing and wholeness. Until our life's journey is over, there will always be more work God needs to do in us. And through Jesus, God does want the healing to take place. Like the leper, on the way, we are being cured when:

- A person who loves us tells us a hard truth we need to hear about ourselves.
- We experience, in a long relationship, opportunities for growth in generosity, forgiveness, patience and humor.
- Parenting teaches us to give our lives for another in frequent doses of our time, energies, hopes and tears.
- We suffer a broken relationship; go for counsel and the guidance we receive gives us hope for our future.

- We seek help for an addiction, and the group members offer us wisdom, support and helping hands when we fall and support us “one day at a time.”
- We suffer the death of a loved one and family and friends are there to grieve with us and eventually there is light at the end of the tunnel.

We find healing, strength, courage and hope in such ordinary ways and this gives us reason to celebrate. We remember the leper who, as he traveled, was cured and realized it was Jesus who cured him. Jesus was the source of the good that had happened to him on the road. In case we miss the point, Jesus underlines it for us when he says to the leper, “Your faith has been your salvation.” Faith helps us see the presence of Jesus with us in all the stages of our journey. Faith helps us see Jesus behind all the healing moments of our lives. Faith keeps us from feeling alone in moments of dire need; it reassures us that we have Someone with us to help us deal with issues that can overwhelm us. Faith saves us from discouragement because of our shortcomings and tells us that God is not done with us yet and so we can travel on in hope until the time when we too “realize” we have been cured.

### QUOTABLE

Dialogue is part of our preaching. When we offer the gospel, we receive a response-negative or positive--which, if we know how to interpret it, opens up new perspectives. “Others” are no mere receivers or passive subjects. As subjects, when they respond, ask or challenge, they make us deepen our own understanding of the gospel. To take seriously and respect the person being evangelized is a sure sign that our preaching is not proselytism.

--the General Chapter of the Dominican Order at Mexico City, 1992.

### JUSTICE NOTES

*"As he was entering a village, ten lepers met him. They stood at a distance from him and raised their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!"(Luke 17:11,12)*

### Called to Compassion and Responsibility

The Gospel today tells us that even those most afflicted by the ostracizing disease of leprosy were expectant of help and compassion from Jesus. The compassionate presence of a caring person today can also help heal. Catholics are called to be compassionate and to actively participate in the lives of those who suffer from HIV/AIDS. We follow the example of Jesus who was an active participant in the lives of the physically, emotionally, and spiritually

afflicted.

Pope John Paul encouraged the Church to uphold the dignity and rights of those who suffer from HIV/AIDS by working to end discrimination. While suffering is an inevitable part of life, and an inevitable aspect of this grave illness, we are called to see the face of Jesus in the afflicted. We are His hands when we minister to our suffering brothers and sisters and offer hope and the healing touch of compassion and care.

"The AIDS crisis can be an opportunity for all of us to experience God's love for us by serving the sick in our own community. As servants of God, we have an opportunity to demonstrate His unconditional love for every one of His children. We are called to go forth and turn our world into a "civilization of love"- the love of Jesus Christ. " (*US Catholic Bishops: "Called to Compassion and Responsibility: A Response to the HIV/AIDS Crisis"*)

**Did you know?** (This pertains to our state of North Carolina but may suggest what is also true in your state and local community.)

- An estimated 22,000 North Carolinians are living with HIV/AIDS
- North Carolina has one of the largest populations in the US of women, men and children waiting for life-sustaining HIV/AIDS medications.

### **What you can do:**

- Learn about HIV/AIDS so you will be more informed and compassionate.
- Curb all humor and discrimination that offend our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Consider joining or forming an Aids Ministry Team in your parish.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

### **POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES**

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." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

- Bryan C. Bell                   #0592464   (On death row since 8/24/01)
- Clifford Ray Miller       #0742512   (10/25/01)
- Reche Smith               #0379083) (3/14/02)

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