

**“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 3<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -C-**

Nehemiah 8: 2-4a, 5-6, 8-10 Psalm 19 1 Corinthians 12: 12-30 Luke 1: 1-4, 4: 14-21

Dear Preachers:

Last week Paul stressed to the Corinthian community that there were among them a rich variety of gifts, all given by the same Spirit. God is active in all our good words and deeds and each of us is gifted in some way to enable God's presence to be felt in the world. Now Paul compares the church to a human body. While we may be independent and individually gifted, he stresses unity. He reminds us that just as the human body has many members, but is all one body, “so also Christ.” Through baptism we become part of one body; all that formerly separated us has been put aside and we “drink of the one Spirit” (Eucharistic reference?).

It seems, judging from Paul's analogy, part of the Corinthian church was excluding some members and claiming others weren't important. By applying this situation to the human body, Paul shows how absurd these exclusionary actions are. The community must appreciate each member. And our differences must not divide us. We don't get along with each other because we have compromised or given in to one group or another in the church; but because we love one another and are concerned for each other's wellbeing.

If you have been wanting to preach about hearing the Word of God and responding to it, this might be a good occasion to do that. While instruction is not the main purpose of liturgical preaching, there's also a catechetical opportunity at some moment in the preaching today to talk about God's presence and our response in our liturgical gatherings as we hear the Word of God proclaimed. In addition, some people say that they can read the Scriptures on their own. They can pray at home instead of coming for these liturgical gatherings. Well, look at the first and third readings and see what happens when the people gather to listen as a community to God.

Remember what had happened when the people of Israel turned away from God? They were left to their own devices, to their reliance on political and military alliances and it spelled doom for them. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem (circa 587 B.C.E) and took the People of God into exile. Their Promised Land was dominated by strangers, the Temple destroyed, and the people taken away. When political events shifted, the people were allowed to return home, to rebuild what was destroyed. Their building had to do with more than rebuilding buildings and Temple; they had the task of rebuilding their very identity. They eventually did rebuilt their holy city of Jerusalem, the Temple and their life of worship. Today's reading from Nehemiah tells part of the story of the restoration, the rededication of the people to the Torah (Pentateuch). The people are gathered to hear the Word of the Lord and be taught its implications for their

lives. Sound familiar?

But why would the people weep when hearing God's Word? They seem to know that there is something of great value in hearing and being instructed in God's Word. Are they weeping because as they hear it they realize how they have fallen short in observing the Word of God? Do they come to realize they have not lived up to their commitment to be God's people? By Ezra's reading the Law, he is in effect calling them to rededication to God. They have recently returned from exile and maybe hearing the Word reminds them of the kind of people they should have been. They may also realize their desertion of God's ways was a cause for their collapse. Maybe they are weeping because in hearing the Word, they are once again hearing their God speak to them offering mercy and reconciliation. We hear the same offer each time we hear God's Word proclaimed at Sunday worship; each time we gather in small groups to reflect on the Word. Aren't you struck, as I am, by the reverence they have for the Word of God, as they bow and prostrate themselves before God? Aren't you also struck by the inclusion into the gathering of the whole community, "men, the women and those children old enough to understand..." ?

What is striking is the intense devotion the people have for the Word. And it doesn't stop with merely reading, but with the Levite's explanation ("instructing the people"). We need people who help us hear the meaning of God's Word for our lives. We thank the lectors who volunteer their time in preparation and proclaiming the Word at our liturgical gatherings. We acknowledge today those in our communities who have dedicated their lives to teaching that Word to us and to all the catechists who instruct our children and inquirers in faith. And, of course, we are grateful to well-prepared preachers who share the fruits of their prayer and hearing of the Word.

"The people listened attentively to the book of the law." I heard of a business man who flies every week, and his frequent flyer miles are now in the millions. How often has he and his fellow passengers heard the emergency instructions by the cabin attendants just prior to takeoff? How much attention do any of us who have flown more than once pay to the instructions? Recently he was on a flight. Just prior to landing the pilot interrupted the routine to tell the passengers that they possibly had landing gear trouble. He looked out at the approaching airport to see the fire engines assembled alongside the runway. They had to circle, dump fuel and listen to emergency procedures again---but this time even the most seasoned flyers paid intense attention. As the man said, "As if our lives depended on our getting them right--because they did!"

There's a parallel to our gathering in the midst of whatever journey we may be on. We pause to

hear God's Word and hope to hear "landing instructions." The people of Israel call us today to pay attention to the God who addresses us---it really means the difference between a life of exile or a life of meaning and community. (By the way, the plane arrived safely.)

Today we have the beginning of Luke's Gospel--our featured Gospel for this liturgical year, and the episode is about the beginning of Jesus' ministry--in Galilee. Luke tells us Jesus "returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit." He is teaching in Galilean synagogues and today's reading finds him in Nazareth. Galilee was called, by the more proper and observant, the land of the Gentiles, because of the mix of peoples living there. Isaiah described them as living "in darkness" (Is. 9:1) and promised that upon them a light will shine. That moment has come. Jesus chooses to proclaim the beginning of his message then in an area that the devout considered semi-pagan. Far from Jerusalem and the center of institutionalized religion, Jesus begins his teaching, guided not by the law and the expected customs, but by "the power of the Spirit." Make no mistake about it, Luke seems to be stressing, God has favored those considered less religious and observant.

Just as Ezra did in our first reading, Jesus reads from scripture and announces that the forces that have robbed people of full life--captivity, blindness, oppression and indebtedness, are now going to be overcome. Christ, "in the power of the Spirit," proclaims a jubilee year when all debts and burdens are dissolved. The poverty of the world around us is not the will of the Spirit, nor is it a result of laziness or sin. Christ, acting in that Spirit, releases us from whatever holds us captive and challenges us to look beyond our immediate concerns to the places of oppression and poverty around us. We stand with him, with the power of the Spirit, to speak and act against all forms of injustice and oppression.

For this preaching I am thinking about "mission statements." It used to be that religious folk, and charitable groups formulated mission statements that said, in effect, "this is who we are, what we value, what we are about and where we are going." These days, every organization and business seems to have their own "mission statements." I saw one on the wall of a dry cleaners recently---really! Jesus proclaims his "mission statement" and draws on the ancient tradition of his people for his source, Isaiah 61. The original text was one of the prophet's "Servant Songs" and in using it, Jesus has defined himself as one "anointed" by God to bring to pass the hopes of the poor, imprisoned and oppressed. People had been yearning for this "day of the Lord" and Jesus announces it is being fulfilled. Here's a simple exercise for the coming week.

Suppose each follower wrote his/her own "mission statement"? It would consist of 6 or 7 statements about our identity and role in the light of our being followers of the "anointed" one

in today's' Gospel. Jesus says the Spirit of God is his source and drawing on his Jewish roots he speaks his identity clearly to us. From what source do we draw our identity and purpose in life? Those are the voices that influence us? By what lights do we make important decisions in our lives? Of course, mission statements are not just for individual identity, they are more commonly used by groups. Does your faith community have a mission statement? Some are published each week on the front page of the parish bulletin. If there is one in your bulletin, read it again and ask yourself, "Can I claim this statement too as a part of this community?"

You may notice that Luke is the only Gospel writer who uses the word "TODAY" in describing this event. This Gospel is very present-tense oriented. Remember: the angel's announcement about "today" a savior is born; to Zacchaeus Jesus says, "today salvation has come to his house"; and to the thief besides him on the cross, Jesus says that "today" he will be with Jesus in Paradise. Today things are being fulfilled in our lives, today we can expect God's response to us in some manner. Today, justice and mercy are being made available to the world. Let's hope we have something to do with this vision so that our "mission statement" and Jesus' coincide.

### **QUOTABLE:**

We seem to operate on the assumption that since everyone can read anyone can read publicly. We regard public reading as little more than the semiautomatic translation of visual symbols into vocal symbols, forgetting that those visual symbols have to pass through mind and heart and be shaped by them if the spoken word is to communicate the emotional color and intellectual content that the author tried to capture and disseminate through the written word. William Skudlarek in, *THE WORD IN WORSHIP*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1981.

### **ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

1. CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C" This compilation, from past "First Impressions," includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for all liturgical years. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://PreacherExchange.com>
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Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P.,

Promoter of Preaching,

Southern Dominican Province, USA

Email: [judeop@juno.com](mailto:judeop@juno.com)