

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 31st SUNDAY -C-

Wisdom 11: 22-12:2 Psalm 145 2 Thessalonians 1: 11-22 Luke 19: 1-10

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Knowing a bit about the background for the Wisdom reading will open up some preaching possibilities. The Wisdom of Solomon was written about a century before Christ by someone in the dispersed Jewish community in Egypt (Alexandria?). So, the setting suggests the Jewish people were among a powerful nation that was advanced in intellectual and scientific knowledge. It was a seductive environment. Some of the accomplishments of the Egyptians could be seen in the pyramids and other great engineering feats. The Jewish community must have struggled to be faithful to its traditional beliefs. Wouldn't they have envied the Egyptians and wondered if the Egyptian gods were not more powerful than their own God? It would be hard to keep faith with God and not feel intimidated by the seeming successes and accomplishments of those around them. It must have been difficult for faithful Jews to keep their children from leaving the ancient beliefs and customs and going over to the surrounding dominant culture. Not too different from our own day, is it? We too are surrounded by other "wisdoms" and they pull us away, not by threatening our lives in martyrdom, but by wearing away at our faith day by day. Our children seem most susceptible to these other "wisdoms".

The book of Wisdom does not come up with a new teaching for the Jews; rather is a compilation of the Wisdom of God's people, a wisdom that permeates the entire Hebrew Scriptures. This book, and particularly today's reading, reflects the wisdom of the ancient Hebrew sages as it stresses the sacredness of life. The Creator has made all things good (allusions to Genesis are obvious) and loves all that has been made. And more! All that God has created shares the Holy One's "imperishable spirit". The reading also emphasizes God's mercy; a mercy based not on our goodness, but on God's love for all that God has made. While we need the mercy of God, we cannot point to anything we have done to earn this mercy. However, mercy is there because God loves all that God has made and extends mercy to us from that love.

This might be a good reading from which to preach about our responsibility

towards the created world around us. We who have a special share in God's "imperishable spirit" will reflect the image of our Creator by caring, as God does, for everything God has made. We are told, God loves, "all things that are." There is a new housing development that designed sewers that allow an endangered snake to survive, since the snake lives in the sewers and can no longer live where the houses were being built. Seems like a lot of effort and expense for an insignificant snake. Why make accommodations like this for insignificant creatures unless one believed that God is their creator and cherishes all, right down to the seeming most insignificant creatures? We also must reflect God's love for all life, especially the lives of those most neglected or despised in our community. Here might be a chance to affirm the value of the lives of the unborn, and the countless and seeming insignificant poor across the face of the earth. Even those on death row are special to God, of whom Wisdom says... "For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made."

The Hubble space telescope keeps discovering new clusters of stars. The further out we can look the more we discover the hand of God. The opening lines of the reading emphasize the created universe and the immensity of God. What would this God, to whom "the whole universe is as a grain from a balance, or a drop of morning dew..." have to do with my daily, insignificant problems? Yet the sage of this book says, "But you have mercy on all...." The great God of the universe cares for us and out of love for us, forgives our sins. Jesus enfleshes this love when he invites himself to eat at the house of the tax collector Zacchaeus. "Today salvation has come to this house...."

Jesus puts actions and words on God's care for all, even the most despised. The God who "loves all things that are," is out on a search. Zacchaeus might have thought he was going looking for Jesus, but the end of the story makes it quite clear that Jesus was seeking Zacchaeus, the one who was lost. For his part, Zacchaeus wasn't just part of a large crowd, one of the idle curious. Crowds gather around superstars, both then and now. Paparazzi hound the rich and famous. But Luke says Zacchaeus had a different reason for being there that day he, "was seeking to see who Jesus was...." He is a model for seekers who don't get immediate satisfaction on their search, but who persist, nevertheless. He is looking to see Jesus, but it turns out, Jesus was out looking for "what was lost." Zacchaeus was lost--- in an unhappy predicament. He was rich from ill-gotten money, despised by the Jewish community for his tax collecting on behalf of the Romans

and probably not even fully accepted by his Roman bosses.

Religious people would have presumed that Zacchaeus was not very high on God's list of important people, hardly a priority for God. Zacchaeus wasn't loveable for anything he did. God loved him because of who God is, not because of any merit on Zacchaeus' part. So, God sent Jesus out to seek and find him. As it was for Zacchaeus, so it is for us. Whether we feel loveable and wonder if we have done enough for God, is not the issue in this story. What Zacchaeus found out was, though he did nothing to deserve it, Jesus had come looking for him and wanted to sit at table with him. God wants to spread a table for us today with the eucharistic bread and wine. Here we listen to the wisdom of God in which we discover ourselves loved and are fed with the life of the One who has found us.

The section this passage appears in is 18:35 - 19:10, and it tells the stories of the blind man and Zacchaeus. It is a summary of Jesus's ministry to the outcasts. It may have been hard for Zacchaeus to let go of what he had gotten through his tax collecting. He was not just a tax collector; he was the chief tax collector. He was at that top of his profession, and he was rich. The job, as despicable as it was to his community, had gotten him his wealth. He couldn't have done it on his own, he couldn't have "saved" himself. It's hard to let go of an accustomed way of life, even when we are miserable with it. In a way, he is "small of stature", living in a small world that has him cut off from a life-giving and supporting community. His vision is small, his chances of escape are small as well--- unless someone from the outside, from a "bigger" world, should come and enable him to get out.

Enter Jesus, the one to bring him a big vision. Both the blind man in the preceding story and Zacchaeus in this receive sight from Jesus. Zacchaeus' eyes are opened, and his vision expands as he promises to give to the poor and return more than he was obliged, to anyone he had defrauded. But his intentions are not what earns his salvation. Rather, they come as a result of hearing the message of salvation, receiving new sight, and experiencing God's unearned love .

Andrew Greeley says that there are two major influences in peoples' lives that affect their religious practices. One is the religious attitudes of their spouses, and the other is the Sunday preaching they hear. (Let's forget the second for a moment.) Greeley says that nothing else much counts. Thus, as salvation comes to the house of Zacchaeus because of his conversion, so we are major influences

for change among those with whom we live. We pray at this Eucharist to be good influences, that through the witness of our lives our homes and this house of worship might also be the place Jesus enters to bring salvation to all within.

This reading says much to us about the Eucharist. Jesus had been accused of welcoming sinners and eating with them. That's what he was planning to do in Jericho, and that's what he plans to do today. The sinners gather around the table, those he has sought out and forgiven. We eat the food that reminds us that we are in the presence of one who caused profound transformations in people's lives. This presence can transform us and our community as well. We have been "sought out" and now we go searching to gather others with us around the table. Since a key element in the story is forgiveness, we now need to "search out" others by being forgiving and being "at home" with them. The Eucharist calls us to forgive... for salvation has entered this house today and we have been forgiven.

READER'S RESPONSE:

I really started something when I misused the expression "the whole nine yards" in a reflection a couple weeks ago. I thought it was from American football. Well now I know better or thought I did when last week I was told it had to do with ammunition for WW II machine guns that came in nine-yard strips. A really severe battle was one that required "the whole nine yards." But I got another suggestion for its meaning. My own brother emailed me and agrees with the following. (Notice in the following, I kept in the part about my "homilies" being very inspired.)

Dear Father Jude,

Your homilies are very inspired, thought-provoking. thank you! I was just struck with an analogy that you used and would like to share my opinion. In my experience "the whole 9 yards" refers to concrete not football. 10 yards is significant in football. Because of weight restrictions the most a concrete truck can carry is nine yards. "The whole 9 yards" is a term that means to unload everything.

This is just the opinion of a retired construction worker.

Shalom

Ross

Any others thoughts on this? Let's go "the whole nine yards!"

ANOTHER RESPONSE:

Subject: Exchange of ideas on peace!

I suggest to everybody to visit the webpage at :

<http://www.maltamedia.com/news/US-attack/war/daniel-comment.shtml>

It has some ideas on peace especially at this moment of war!

Daniel Bartolo

QUOTABLE:

“You who are accustomed to be present at the divine mysteries know how you receive the Lord’s body with every care and reverence, lest the smallest crumb of the consecrated gift should be dropped. You would think rightly that you are culpable if something fell to the ground through your negligence. If you use, and rightly use, such care about his body, why do you think it less of a crime to be negligent about his Word that is his body.”

—Origen

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.)

We should pray for the victims and the families of those who have been hurt or murdered in these crazy acts. Yet we should also pray that America does not return to "business as usual," but rather turns to a period of reflection, coming back into touch with our common humanity, asking ourselves how our institutions can best embody our highest values. We may need a global day of atonement and repentance dedicated to finding a way to turn the direction of our society at every level, a return to the most basic Biblical ideal: that every human life is sacred, that "the bottom line" should be the creation of a world of love and caring, and that the best way to prevent these kinds of acts is not to turn ourselves into a police state,

but turn ourselves into a society in which social justice, love, and compassion are so prevalent that violence becomes only a distant memory.

--Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of TIKKUN Magazine and rabbi of Beyt Tikkun Synagogue in San Francisco (From the Pax Christi webpage)