

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 5TH. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME -C-

Isaiah 6: 1-2a, 3-8 Psalm 138 I Corinthians 15: 1-11 Luke 5: 1-11

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Let's look at the Gospel first. Peter was involved in the familiar chores of his everyday life. In these he, like us, was most familiar. But the familiar got turned around for him. In the very place he worked and where he seemed most sure of what he was doing, he first met failure--- and then he met God. It is a day when he catches no fish. Peter is not a sports fisherman, he is not out for a leisurely day casting a line into the lake, listening to a ball game, having a beer. He had to fulfill his role as father, husband and business partner. This is his life; people depended on him; he and his family rely on this occupation for daily life. What he thought he knew best, just wasn't working for him. The formula was basic: No fish equals no income---- and that meant no food for himself and his family.

And so, Peter's usual routine, his accustomed ways to provide for himself and others, weren't giving him life that day. It was frustrating and he felt his human limitations, unable to handle what he had to do. Into that place of frustration and failure, Jesus makes his entrance. After teaching the crowds Jesus turns his attention to this one man and his situation. He talked Peter's language---the language of daily work, struggle, immediate concerns for life and wellbeing and frustration. The conversation gets very intense and takes on deeper meaning than a chat about the day's catch. Jesus is a good model for us preachers. Unless we speak the message in terms of people's daily lives and in their vocabulary, the proclamation of the Gospel will have no meaning for them.

We examine our lives and ask if they “satisfy” us--- not just that they provide us with all our needs, but are our lives “significant”? Do we feel we make a difference; that we are involved in something meaningful? To these issues Jesus addresses us, as he does Peter, and asks us to go into “deep water.” Maybe the invitation doesn't make sense at first. Maybe it comes as just a simple step we take--- like having a conversation we have been putting off with our spouse; going on a retreat; becoming a volunteer at a school or homeless shelter; deciding to move closer to an ailing parent so as to be of help; taking a bible or religion course, etc. But that simple step begins a series of steps that lead us into “deeper water” and our lives are forever changed and there is no going back. We not only find our own lives changing, there is an overflow to the lives of those around us.

A friend was invited by his pastor to teach a religion course to teenagers. This was entirely new

for him. My friend felt woefully unprepared and even scared! In addition, he asked, “Who am I to be teaching religion, I’m no saint!” So, he did a lot of studying, praying and talking to other teachers in the parish. When the time came for classes to start, he dove right in--- he plunged into deeper waters. That was 7 years ago, and his life has been unalterably changed. Of course, he has less free time and doesn’t watch as much sports tv; he says he needs the time to prepare for class. Or, he has been busy meeting with some of his students discussing their problems. He is even planning to go off with them for a retreat and is getting his “talks” ready. Two of his “consultants” have been his own teenage daughters and those conversations have helped their own communication at home. It was as if Jesus walked by one day, saw him at his work, doing his “own thing” and invited him out into deeper waters. And that, he says, has made all the difference!

Jesus doesn’t deny Peter’s protests about his unworthiness. Yes, we and Peter are sinners. Before Jesus, how could we not acknowledge it? But Jesus wants followers anyway. The invitation is to follow. The road isn’t spelled out, we are just invited to follow in his steps—those steps may take us to our workplace, to the side of our sick parents, to Mc Donald’s with our children, to the school basketball game, to our child’s school play, to the committee meeting about the homeless, etc.

Maybe we have been living our lives in the shallow water. Now we are invited to go deeper. “At that time of the day”—they are being invited to do something at a later part of the fishing day. It is as if we are invited now, no matter how old we are, or how unfamiliar we are with religious practices---now, we are invited to launch out again in response to an invitation we are hearing at this moment. Do we want to stay in shallow water, or will we respond and go deeper? Where could this lead? To deeper relationships? To a deeper sense of God in our daily lives?

As I travel I notice how many people are reading books that deal with spirituality, of one kind or another. There are lots of “chicken soup for the soul” books. A businesswoman sitting next to me on a plane recently was reading the Dali Lama’s book and in our conversation she talked about how much it meant to her in her daily life. These bestselling books show how people are hungering to find deeper sense for their daily lives, they are attempting to journey into deeper waters.

Sometimes the “deep water” means we find ourselves in over our heads. We struggle to find meaning in our lives by what is happening. I am amazed when people tell me after, or even during a serious sickness, “That sickness was the best thing to ever happen to me. While I was sick I began to reevaluate my life and the path I was on.” During the economic downturn of a

few years ago people who lost high paying jobs had to settle for less money in the new jobs they found. But some will also say, “My career change was a wakeup call for me, life had gotten out of control. I was a compulsive worker, and my career was consuming me and wearing down my family. Now, with this new job, I have less money, but more time with my family and myself.”

Let’s look at the reading from 1 Corinthians. First, recall some background. Reading and preaching from Paul requires knowing the context of a passage within the whole epistle, lest the passage seem “out of the blue,” leaving us wondering what is going on. Paul has heard that the Corinthian community is boasting about their spiritual gifts. They were ranking gifts and were critical of those not having certain ones. These boastings were tearing the community apart. In earlier parts of the letter he has argued that their gifts were not the result of human achievement or special privilege but were given by the Spirit for the sake of the whole community. The church is one body, Paul tells us, (1 Cor. 12, the 3rd Sunday), animated and gifted by God. There is no room in the church for a destructive divisiveness resulting from competitiveness. Last Sunday, Paul reminded the community of the greatest gift, the gift of love. Love is what really matters in the community’s life. That’s enough about the context of this reading.

In today’s passage Paul repeats a familiar pattern or structure: he begins by announcing his topic and then shows its consequences for the Corinthian church. Apparently some members are denying the resurrection of the dead (cf. 15:12--the very next verse after today’s selection says, “...how is it that some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?”.... His hearers in Corinth seem to believe in Christ’s resurrection, but not their own. Christ’s resurrection from the dead is just the first step, for we too will rise. He is restating his basic preaching and belief, the foundation on which the church is built. He is not arguing his point with logic or conclusive proof; he is just proclaiming what they have already heard from his preaching.

Here’s an inroad for the preacher drawn from athletic competition, be it the recent Super Bowl, figure skating championships, golf games or gymnastic competition. From athletics we learn: it is a good idea to review the basics from time to time. When an athletic team or individual forgets the basics of training and the fundamentals of the game, then the smartest coaches, the latest equipment, computer designed training programs, sophisticated plays, etc. are for naught. A wise coach knows when to get the athlete back on track and “return to basics.”

We might be in the midst of many discussions and debates in the church regarding all sorts of differences of opinions, practices in liturgy, roles of laity, power of the hierarchy, religious training for our children, etc. But here at this moment, Paul brings us back to the basics. The

Story is restated for us, the tradition, on which all tradition rests, is once again proclaimed before the community. Paul is saying to the Corinthian community: let's not lose sight of what we believe. Paul has passed on to them the Gospel he received, which has been the foundation and source for the remarkable changes that occurred in his life. He was not the source or inspiration for the great change in his life; it came as a gift. "By God's favor [grace], I am what I am." And it also came through a long line of witnesses to us.

We might be grateful this day for those who were most influential in handing on the faith to us. Believing in the resurrection and holding fast to this faith is a transforming power; it was for Paul and it has been for us as well. Faith has strengthened us to deal with the terrible onslaughts of death in all its forms in our lives. Resurrection-faith has enabled us to get up and start all over again and hold on to hope in our most discouraged and pain-filled moments. Paul reminds us, "... of the Gospel I preached to you..." That Gospel has been passed on through the lives of innumerable faithful witnesses right up to our time. As a result, we 'are being saved by it at this very moment.' Paul is passing this on to us; we are back to basics.

The passage begins with a reminder that we "stand firm" in the faith we have received. And don't we need something to help us "stand firm" when so much would try to knock us off our feet? Faith in the resurrection helps us stand up against some pretty battering forces. What helps us get through a storm and not get driven off course or lost? We need a map, compass and firm footing. That's what Paul is suggesting we have in the faith that has been passed on to us: "...that Christ died for our sins in accord with the Scriptures, that he was buried and in accord with the Scriptures rose on the third day: that he was seen..."

QUOTABLE:

Though the Second Vatican Council mandated that the proclamation, preaching, and study of Scripture was to be at the heart of church life, the vitality of the biblical renewal seems overwhelmed by a massive increase in official teaching and theological reflection. Also, at home and at work Catholics are faced with literalist readings of Scripture. Overworked priests and bishops find it difficult to dedicate the time and energy to prepare challenging biblical homilies. Paradoxically, Scripture seems to remain vital among those unordained "ministers of the word," through such things as catechesis of adults preparing for Christian initiation, parish study groups and summer Scripture institutes. If the spirit of the jubilee is to continue, the church must renew its commitment to live and study the word of God and explore other ways in which more Catholics living the Gospel may become truly "ministers of the word," and so manifest the diversity of gifts of the Spirit described by St. Paul to the Corinthians.

----John R. Donahue, S.J. in AMERICA, January 8-15, 2001, page 23.

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>
2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (FrJude@JudeOP.org)
3. Our webpage address: <https://preacherexchange.com> where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilías Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)
4. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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